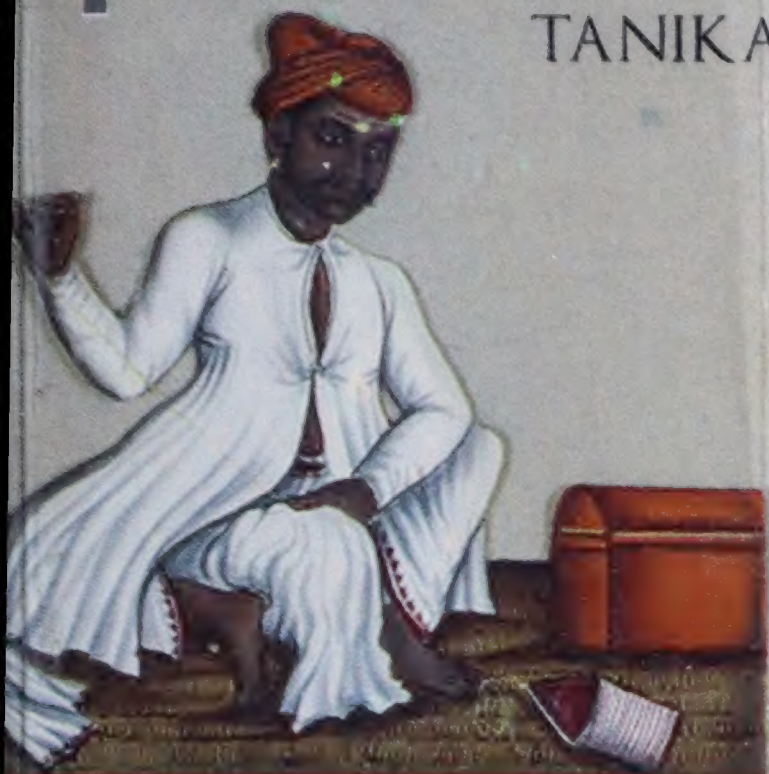


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EDITED BY
SUMIT SARKAR
TANIKA SARKAR



CASTE

IN MODERN INDIA

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CASTE IN MODERN INDIA

MODERN INDIA

A Reader

VOLUME I

Edited by

SUMIT SARKAR AND TANDA SARKAR

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CASTE IN MODERN INDIA

A Reader

VOLUME 1

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SUMIT SARKAR AND TANIKA SARKAR



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Preface and Acknowledgements

Caste has emerged as the key discursive category in contemporary Indian social thinking, dislodging the earlier emphases on class and nation to a considerable extent, and producing scholarly explorations and polemical controversies in equal measure. The historical literature on caste in colonial times is, therefore, vast and rich, and arriving at a reasonable selection from the corpus proved exceedingly difficult. We will briefly explain the organizational scheme that we have followed in planning these two volumes.

The essays explore certain specific aspects of modern caste: how the issue of caste was variously understood in colonial times, how it was re-created under conditions of modernity, and how various castes came to relate to one another and to themselves in new ways. The volumes exclude, therefore, sociological studies of the structure of castes, as well as social anthropologies and ethnographies of lives of castes on the ground. However, the essays reproduced here have considerably absorbed the insights that such writings have produced. They also engage in debates that were first raised in these fields, thereby adding important dimensions to them. Dirks, for instance, questions Dumont's notions about purity and power, while Breman and Guha argue with the literature on *jajmani*—to mention just two instances.

For a long time, historians of modern caste have been trying to ascertain how far caste was invented, exaggerated, colluded with, and opposed by discourses of colonial social knowledge and administrative policies. In fact, the dominant strand in post-colonial historiography tended to focus almost exclusively on colonial and Western knowledge that sought an Othering of India, a stigmatization of the culture of the colonized on account of their emphasis on caste. Administrative concerns have, on the whole, been neglected. The first set of eight

essays under the theme 'Caste in Colonial Times' reflect on colonial sociology as well as on the governance of caste, but also go beyond them. Washbrook and Dirks trace aspects of the transition from pre-colonial to colonial times and discuss how this affected possibilities of 'low caste' mobility in the political domain, in labour markets, and in temples. Bayly queries Inden's view that caste was essentially a colonial imaginary. She points out the many strands of colonial opinion on caste, all of which were profoundly influenced by brahmanical advice. Metcalf describes the emergence of colonial ethnography from the mid nineteenth century, focusing especially on photographic techniques, even while he points out Indian discomfort with such uses. Caton diversifies the practices of colonial sociology by exploring the theme of Punjab exceptionalism since classificatory categories were significantly different in that region. While Bayly, Metcalf, and Caton point out pluralities in colonial knowledge and classificatory practices, Guha explores the *jajmani–balutedari* system in western India over 300 years. He suggests that the small scale of local markets which conditioned the system had its own specificities, making division of labour and status ascriptions more complex and flexible than suggested by Dumont and Wiser. Roger's article on caste in colonial Sri Lanka may appear out of place as it goes beyond British India and the Hindu socio-ritual context. But the essay is important precisely because it looks at caste-like formations among Sinhala Buddhists, and also because in both countries colonial officials engaged in understanding and classifying social categories in similar ways. Constable's article discusses colonial policies on caste segregation in the supposedly neutral space of modern schools in western India. He finds that they were uncertainly forged under contrary pressure from missionary educators, upper-caste Hindu parents, and untouchable students.

The second set of essays, under the theme 'Caste and the Census', elaborates the specific domain of decennial censuses which have long been regarded as *the* terrain where social categories were formed. Samarendra, through arguments with Dirks and Bayly, invokes the peculiarity of the word 'caste' in colonial usage and discusses what it does to Indian categories of *varna* and *jati* in the making of censuses. He points out, in the process, the mutability of all categories from one census to another. Conlon looks at different censuses to recover small but important shifts and variations across time and space, even

as he ponders on the interlacing of the two dominant classificatory categories of religion and caste. Cohn looks at changes between pre-census and census modes of enumeration, points out various levels within census activities, and identifies the precise areas where Indian voices—of ritual specialists and enumerators—enter and influence classificatory models.

Together, the first two sets of essays ponder on whether all colonial administrators, throughout British governance, were united by similar concerns and strategies, or, if their approaches varied, were multiple and shifting according to changing contingencies: how large was the space in this for Indian interventions, especially of brahman informants who advised puzzled administrators about the intricacies of caste; and how far was caste refashioned by Indian discourses and initiatives, competitions and conflicts, irrespective of the stances of the state?

With the third theme, 'Caste, Sect, Religion', we transit to the domain of Indian initiatives to explore how castes negotiated with the modern world through the prism of new religious imaginaries and sectarian practices. 'Low-caste' sectarianism is thought to lead, unwittingly, to a congruence between caste and sect. The six essays under this theme explore somewhat similar processes in different temporal and regional contexts whose social-material specifics are carefully laid out along with the new religious worlds they articulated. Three of these 'low-caste' sects—the Satnamis of Chattisgarh, the Matuas of Eastern Bengal, and the Tiyyas and Ezhavas in Malabar—created modes of resistance to upper-caste exclusionary measures and religious injunctions which came to be resented in conditions of relative economic solvency. However, each of these religions of protest, nonetheless, re-creates the symbolic universe of upper-caste temples, shrines, and festivals, as well as their internal authority structures. The sect activities under discussion, are, therefore, neither the mimicry of upper-caste forms that Moffat had suggested, nor are they an exact reflection of Srinivas's Sanskritization thesis. The essay on Balakdashis, by contrast, studies a 'low-caste' sect in Eastern Bengal that was explicitly conformist with brahmanical authority. Yet the mythology and hagiography of the sect are scored over with vulnerabilities as well as with new possibilities of mobility that the subaltern founder and followers of the sect lived with.

Geetha looks at the re-emergence of Buddhism from the late nineteenth century in association with organized caste protest in Madras and Bombay, examining Iyothee Thass's re-creation of a socially marked Buddhism and contrasting it with Ambedkar's strident egalitarianism and its theological form. Venkatachalapathy considers a similar situation in early-twentieth-century Madras, where political movements intermingle closely with theological debates, and complex and unstable alliances are formed among Saivites, non-Brahman politics, and anti-Hindi, anti-Vaisnav, and anti-Congress movements. He shows E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker weaving all these divergent interests together and then destabilizing them with his caste radicalism and defiance of faith.

The fourth theme, 'Caste and Forms of Labour', begins with three essays which constitute a single unit, based on an important debate about 'agrestic slavery' and landlessness in the South. S.J. Patel used census data to suggest that landless labour—among 'depressed classes' or 'low castes'—grew exponentially under British rule, dictated by new revenue settlements and market conditions. The economic vulnerability of 'low' castes, he says, was thus a British creation. Kumar differs sharply, on the grounds that since both landlessness and caste discrimination were most acute in the South, there would have been a cause and effect connection between social and economic vulnerability. She finds confirmation of her view in early colonial pre-census data which shows an identical intertwining between 'low' caste and landlessness, pre-dating colonial economic policies. Krishnamurty adds to the debate indirectly by pointing out problems in Patel's use of census data, thereby strengthening Kumar's conclusions. Breman studies *halipratha*, a master-servant relationship between brahmans and untouchable labourers who are attached to their masters in a form of debt bondage. He contributes significantly to the debate about *jajmani*, or ascribed labour forms, along caste lines in rural situations: a debate about whether such unfree labour signified security or exploitation. He shows how both are interlaced as their masters' honour and status depend on the possession of attached servants whose survival, albeit in conditions of extreme unfreedom and exploitation, depend on the subsistence provided by masters. Gooptu looks at the twentieth-century labour migration of untouchable castes to UP towns and the implications of urban existence and labour for

them. She sees it as a combination of freedom from everyday direct domination and discrimination from rural caste relations along with degraded occupations and a marginalized existence. She then traces this commingling in new untouchable urban sects.

Five essays come next, to discuss 'Caste, Gender, and Identity'. Four of them look at new processes of caste identity formation among dalit communities of northern, western, and eastern India. Unlike some of the earlier essays, which trace continuities and breaks from pre-colonial conditions, Rao begins with a 1963 legal case of sexual abuse of dalit women and traces its implications back to Ambedkar's times to see how a caste-gender system emerged variously in upper- and lower-caste discourses and practices. Deshpande develops a long-term historical perspective on caste competition over the term 'Maratha' and the varied interpretations and connotations that came to accrue to this rather open category. Significantly, notions of a martial masculinity of kshatriyahood were crucial components of the claim. Gupta looks at the urbanization of dalit communities in North India, and at the images and self-images that social change wrought. While upper-caste, missionary, and colonial records depict them as docile, they also contain anxious subtexts about a potentially violent masculinity and a promiscuous female sexuality that could threaten caste boundaries. Sumit Sarkar develops a close study of a set of early-twentieth-century treatises written by a dalit group which sought to transform their caste name from Chandal to a more respectable Namashudra. As the census provided the conditions for a new status, their Namashudra identity had to be competitively constructed in conflictual relationship with other social groups.

Ambedkar had once identified endogamy as the basis of caste, and its centrality in Hindu marriage and kinship continues in contemporary times. Yet it is precisely this sphere of caste functioning that is most neglected in caste studies. Majumdar's discussion of the modernization of Hindu arranged marriage forms in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Bengal looks at a shift away from older custodians of caste genealogies to new caste journals which largely took over the work of aligning marriage with status.

In the sixth set of essays, on 'Caste and the Nation', Jaffrelot compares Ambedkar's analysis of caste with later sociological scholarship and points out how much Ambedkar anticipated the insights of

sociologists. He then reads Ambedkar's text to identify how his scholarly analysis was intertwined with his political aim of exposing the non-viability of the entire system. Nagaraj revisits the epic combat between Gandhi and Ambedkar in the 1930s from a very different perspective, arguing that behind the more obvious contentions lay a deeper process of unacknowledged learning from each other. Pandian begins with the ways in which caste is simultaneously invoked and nullified in upper-caste memories, counterposing this to the overwhelming power of caste for dalit recollections. Contra Partha Chatterjee, he argues that even though the cultural sphere of the colonized is seen as a space of sovereignty, it is more important to problematize that excess as constituted by power relations within Indian society. Until dalits unsettle the public-private divide by articulating the repressed areas of nationalist discourses, caste will always be seen as a matter of private predilections.

This brings us to the last set of essays, on 'Caste and Resistance'. O'Hanlon traces the beginnings of modern caste protest in the practical activism and polemical writings of Jyotirao Phule. Hardiman looks at the relationship of dalits and adivasis—subaltern groups whose dividing line is not always clear—with Gandhian nationalism and its hegemonic aspirations to re-create and control the politics and lifeworlds of both. Rawat studies the dalits of UP and identifies three critical moments in the development of an autonomous and organized dalit politics which evolves from resistance to an abusive and degraded nomenclature to a caste federation.

It is clear that the thirty-three essays which follow speak to one another, sometimes exploring the same historical narrative on different registers: those on dalits of UP, Bengal, western, and southern India, for instance. Sometimes they argue with one another: Jaffrelot and Hardiman on the one hand, and Nagaraj on the other, have somewhat divergent views on the relationship between Ambedkar and Gandhian nationalism. At other times, several essays address shared debates: with Dumont, Wiser, or with nationalist historians. We were careful to select writings that are mutually inter-animating.

We also tried to preserve the integrity of the writings by reproducing entire chapters and articles in order to avoid cutting and pasting, but we cannot claim hundred per cent success: three or four pieces could not be reproduced in their entirety. In several essays, caste gets

reframed by various other horizons: gender, class relations, nation, systems of knowledge. We did not try to cull the specific matter of caste out of them as we believed that no social category is a standalone, each being relational rather than exclusive or substantive.

The literature on caste is so voluminous that, in order to manage within two fat volumes, we had to our great disappointment to leave out much that we would have liked to include: much more, for example, from Bayly, Constable, Rao. We could not include essays by Valerian Rodrigues (on Ambedkar) and Neeladri Bhattacharya (on the codification of custom) which would have added greatly to the value of this collection. We were deeply disappointed at failing in all our efforts to contact Lucy Carroll or her publisher for permission to include her masterly study of caste associations. And much as we would have liked to include the work of Marc Galanter, the subject of caste, law, and reservations merits a volume by itself.

We are extremely grateful to all the authors and to their publishers for their generous consent to be part of these volumes. Rukun Advani has been a silent co-editor; and we thank S. Ghosh for securing permission from authors and publishers, many of whom expressed admiration for her efficiency. Anirban Bandyopadhyay helped us with assembling all the various contributions. Copyright details and acknowledgement of reproduction permissions are provided, whenever required, and in the form specified by the copyright owner, within the first footnote of each essay. Citation methods vary across the essays: efforts to standardize the variety would have required time and effort out of all proportion to the value.

We dedicate this collection to the teachers and students of Delhi University who are struggling, against impossible odds, to save their institution from imminent and brutal destruction.

SUMIT SARKAR AND TANIKA SARKAR, MAY 2013

Land and Labour in Late- Eighteenth-Century South India

The Golden Age of the Pariah?*

DAVID WASHBROOK

In recent years, interpretation of the history of agrarian social structure in India has undergone a remarkable transformation—one might say reversal. From perspectives which saw a static, ageless society of village communities broken open during the nineteenth century by the forces of Western capitalism and 'modernity', we have moved towards views of a highly mobile and economically differentiated society rendered stationary and 'traditional' by the processes of 'peasantisation' implicit in the colonial project (Ludden 1985; Bayly 1983 and 1988; Washbrook 1988). Thus far, however, explorations of this new perspective (as indeed of the old one) have been inclined to concentrate almost exclusively on the relations of commerce, investment, and market production. Much less attention has been paid to issues of labour, subsistence, and social reproduction. This seems a pity, not only for the narrowness and implicit class bias of the historiography but also because it overlooks a crucial set of forces informing, and perhaps determining, the specific forms of capitalist exploitation and development. From some theoretical positions at least, such forms are not the simple or logical products of 'market

*Copyright © 1993 David Washbrook. Reproduced by permission of the author. First published in Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 68–86.

expansion' but the complex outcomes of continuous processes of class struggle (Brenner 1976 and 1977).

Of course, what is meant by the term 'labour' in the context of eighteenth- (as of nineteenth- and twentieth-) century and South (and North, East, and West) India is somewhat problematic. Our concepts have been much affected by the rise, on the one side, of a capitalist modernity which would render the whole of the past in its own image; and, on the other, by a legacy of Orientalism, which would construe it as a mystery of Indological tradition. Labour is seen either as 'rightless' and 'proto-proletarian' from the beginning of time or else as deeply and immovably 'embedded' in the a-rational social systems supplied by custom, caste, and the jajmani system.

I

As much recent research has shown, however, neither perspective makes much sense of South Indian historical conditions. Caste status and actual occupation, for example, had become markedly differentiated long before the beginning of the colonial period (Ludden 1985). Equally, whether we accept Chicherov's view that the relations of the jajmani system were breaking down under the weight of commercial forces or Fuller's more radical view that the South never possessed the classic village-based jajmani system (and that its nineteenth-century 'remnants' were the remains of a quite different system of distribution), the conclusion for this period is much the same. South India's labour systems were not organized on jajmani principles but responded to the logic of wider 'state' and market influences (Chicherov 1971; Fuller 1977).

However, it would be no less problematic to suppose that these 'wider influences' constituted a system approximating to modern capitalism or even to late-nineteenth-century colonialism. Dharma Kumar's pioneering studies of land and labour in South India, for example, took mid-to-late nineteenth-century (caste-based) definitions of landless labour and read them back into the beginnings of the colonial period. This produced a picture of considerable continuity with landless labourers representing about 15 per cent of the population (varying between 10 and 20 per cent by district) across the whole period (Kumar 1965). In later works, she also suggested that both the structure and the nature of landholding rights did not change

greatly over the nineteenth century (Kumar 1975; but consider the different implications of Kumar 1983). Viewed in the economic and institutional contexts of 'late pre-colonial' and early Company South India, her definitions, and images of continuity, may be misleading.

If 'landless' labour were taken to mean labour 'without rights' to land or other means of subsistence, the concept would obscure more than it reveals. The pastoralist sectors of the economy were more highly developed at this time than later, and, in some areas, 'landless' groups were very much property-owning in other regards, such as livestock. Equally, since the seventeenth century, the expansion of the textile industry had drawn in labour from the lower levels of the agrarian economy and, again, many landless groups were not 'loom-less'. Further, most groups of agricultural 'labourers' possessed rights giving them access to, at the very least, shares in the agricultural product and, in many cases, even to 'personal' cultivating rights. In general, proprietary rights over land were described in terms of discrete shares in the social product, shares which included returns to labour. Also, and by no means infrequently, such shares included rights of access to cultivation (of 'garden' plots, and so on). Indeed, payment to 'non-agricultural' castes for their services often took the form of cultivating rights to 'inam' lands (Sivakumar 1978, ch. 5; Stein 1984). In these senses, membership of a 'landless labour caste' in the eighteenth century did not necessarily imply an absence of all 'property' and an entire reliance on the sale of 'labour power', as, to a considerable degree, it did later. Moreover and conversely, the 'ownership' of land did not imply full or absolute proprietary rights over territory as also it did later in the nineteenth century: the subsidiary claims on its products were not abrogable. Thus Dharma Kumar's sense of continuity masks a fundamental change in structures and categories.

But if the relations between property and labour in pre-modern South India did not reflect the complete separation of rights inherent in 'capitalism', what did they reflect and how should they be conceptualized? Another approach to them has focused on relations of agrestic servitude and bondage, and conceived them in terms of variations on the theme of slavery (Hjelje 1966; Gough 1981). There are, however, problems here too. Although Gough, in particular, would seem to want to generalize the existence of relations of personal, long-term servitude to the whole of 'South-East' India, they were common only in limited parts of the Kaveri delta (and in Malabar on the West

coast). Outside the most intensive zones of 'wet' agriculture (that is, over the great mass of South India) they were scarcely found. Second, in any event, considering '*adimai*' relations as an orchestration of the universal theme of 'slavery' is problematic because no class of *adimai* (except perhaps on the West coast) was without personal rights or treatable as simple chattel slaves. Most existed in relations of mutual obligation (for protection and subsistence) with their masters: relations which could be abrogated if obligations were not met or were violated. Of course, sometimes masters did violate their obligations; and sometimes too *adimai* did discover that their rights were more theoretical than real. But there is much to suggest that, at the level of moral norms, these rights were widely recognized: famously, seventeenth-century South Indian kings disapproved of the notions of chattel-slavery possessed by the Dutch (Raychaudhuri 1963). Moreover, as we shall see, the political and economic conditions of the eighteenth century favour the realisation of *adimai* rights since effective methods of coercion were difficult to apply.

It was a justificatory claim of colonialism to have 'freed' labour in South India from its traditional bondage, and much later writing about South India *adimai* seems to have caught its tone from that of the colonial authorities, with heavy emphasis placed on the most anomalous and abhorrent features of the latter's traditional and 'dominated' existence. However, as Gyan Prakash has recently reminded us and as debates in Marxism have started to contend, definitions of 'free' labour and 'freedom' under colonialism and capitalism are not without their own blind spots (Prakash 1990; Cohen 1987). The concept of 'freedom' possesses very positive connotations in the liberal political vocabulary, and it has long been a task of ideologues of both capitalism and colonialism to 'free' labour from subjection to bonds of personal political constraint. However, it can scarcely be disguised that, under capitalism, 'freed' labour is then placed under an economic constraint (to reproduce itself through the labour market), which may threaten its subsistence more intensively than was the case before. This is not the least because the 'freeing' process may abrogate those rights which labour used to possess *vis-à-vis* its personal political oppressors, but offers labour no rights, beyond its supply and demand 'price', in the free market. (Marx, it may be remembered, consistently used the word

'*vogelfrei*' to describe 'free' labour: this has none of the positive connotations of liberal freedom but is the medieval German legal term for a runaway serf, who is free in the sense of possessing no rights and who may be killed, captured or used at will.) Set against the harsh social realities facing 'freed' labour in the context of modern South India, it may be time to reassess the meanings—for labour itself—of its sometimes Babylonian captivity.

II

In the light of these various and many problems of concept and interpretation, it may be best to go back to basics and start with 'thick description' of the worlds of labour in the eighteenth century. Limitations of space, however, prevent that, so, here, I will only try to pick out a few distinctive features. First, as mentioned before, the economy was highly diversified in comparison to its late nineteenth-century successor. Besides pastoralism and artisanal manufacture, there was a substantial service sector around temples, courts, towns, and armies, which made heavy demands for labour. Statistics for this epoch are notoriously partial and unreliable. But several early-colonial surveys indicate that as little as 60 per cent of the workforce may have been engaged directly in agriculture (Ludden 1988).

The diversity of the economy, of course, also meant a high degree of specialization and hence of 'exchange' between sectors. Indeed, labour was largely reproduced through exchange relations. This was not necessarily 'market' (that is, price rational) exchange: there remained many systems of re-distribution derived from the logic of temple, royal, and clan 'honours'. However, there is much evidence to suggest that money forms had penetrated most of these systems of exchange by the later medieval period, and that, by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most responded to some species of price-rational logic (Hall 1980; Chaudhuri 1979). The relations of labour, even in agriculture, had partially been affected by these forces. Early British land surveys contained records of the crop-shares accorded to labour. As Sivakumar has shown, the differential proportion of these shares between various cropping regimes accords closely with a demand schedule of differential labour inputs—that is, the more labour involved in

production, the higher the proportion of the crop deducted in labour payments (Sivakumar 1978, ch. 5). In zones of specialized rice and cash crop production, labourers received their shares in commodities which they did not consume. They were generally held responsible, themselves, for exchanging those commodities in the market against the dry grains which they ate. An early survey of commerce in the Ceded Districts, for example, suggested that common labourers were, proportional to their earnings, even more engaged in 'trade' than landholding farming families (Stein 1984). Both practically and symbolically, 'money' had become entwined in the relations of labour. Records of labourers' contracts indicate that a cash payment, as well as crop-shares and clothing, was generally part of the arrangement; in many cases, the public and symbolic presentation of a piece of money (inscribed with a king's head) was taken as the central act 'legally' constituting the contract (Baramahal Records VI, p. 27).

As might be expected in so specialized and exchange-related an economy, labour was also mobile—physically, sectorally, and even 'socially'. Except in a (very) few zones of irrigated agriculture, cultivation was ecologically and climatically unstable from season to season. 'Peasants' (of all shapes and sizes, including labouring families) moved between village sites on a regular basis. Lionel Place (the first Collector of the Chingleput jagir) estimated in the 1790s an annual rate of inter-village population movement of around 13 per cent (Place 1795). According to its first Surveyor, a series of bad seasons in Ramnad district between 1810 and 1814 led about a third of its entire population to migrate temporarily to neighbouring Tanjavur district and the waters of the Kaveri delta (MDR Madura 9085, p. 215). Sometimes these movements involved whole local communities (large capital-providing farmers, petty peasants, and labourers) moving together en bloc. But there is much to suggest that both petty peasants and labourers (who, except at the level of caste, are not easily distinguishable) could move independently. Most village records indicate that land was offered on special concessionary rates to peripatetic *pykari* cultivators who would come in for a season or two to swell local levels of labour power and production. Indeed, certain dangerous agricultural terrains were wholly populated in this way. At the mouth of the Godaveri delta, for example, the riverine system occasionally threw up silt islands which, though immensely

rich, were hazardous to cultivate due to 'fever' (probably malaria). They were known as 'pariah islands' because they were almost exclusively cultivated by pariahs (*parayan*) who were prepared to stand the risks in order to take the chance of making a quick financial killing (Madras Revenue Consultations, Report of Committee on Permanent Settlement, para 5240, IOL).

Of course, if this financial killing were made (and its physical price postponed), opportunities were opened up for wider economic and, to a degree, social mobility. In the agricultural economy, there remained some (although weakening) constraints on pariah castes 'possessing' land in their own right. However, they might come to perform economic roles similar to those of the lesser members of 'possessing' groups. In most areas, they could acquire livestock to add to the skills of their labour power. As most production regimes involved communal labour operations, they did much the same work as petty peasants, the difference being only that their rewards were calculated as a 'labour' share of the product rather than an 'owner's' share. But even this could be blurred: untouchable labour was permitted in its own right to cultivate *inam* lands belonging to the community of the 'possessors'; very often (especially in Tanjavur) it farmed land directly on share-cropping tenancy, just like poorer members of upper castes.

Moreover, besides enjoying some scope for mobility within the agricultural economy, 'landless' labour enjoyed much more outside it. Although the higher levels of skill in the weaving, construction, military, and other 'industries' were protected by (powerful) exclusionary corporate organizations, the lower levels could open up to pressures of demand. Equally, it was possible to start 'merchandizing' on very low levels of initial capital, even if upward mobility to the point of achieving accredited 'Chetty' status required substantially more capital—both real and 'symbolic'—than most erstwhile labouring groups were ever likely to acquire. When the late-nineteenth-century colonial authorities tried to match formal caste status to actual economic role and reward, they recorded at least the remnants of a system whose lack of rigidities left them utterly confused and bewildered. Nor was it only economic roles that failed to fit with the anticipation of varna-caste theory: it was also effective local status roles. The flexibilities of temple, clan, and royal honours systems meant that economic success was widely translated into social prestige, and the privileges claimed

by various local groups of sometime common labouring origin were very variegated indeed (Appadurai and Appadurai 1976).

In comparison to the late nineteenth century, too, the returns to labour—of various kinds and various sorts—look remarkably high although also marked by much greater uncertainty. In agriculture, for example, standard wages through most of the second half of the nineteenth century would seem to have worked out at the equivalent of 2 seers (about 4 lbs) of grain (millet or unhusked paddy) per adult male per day. This represents 120 lbs per month. However, if the shares to labour recorded in the village surveys and papers of the eighteenth century were actually paid, they frequently work out, in good agricultural seasons, at the equivalent of over 200 lbs per month. That these figures might not be purely notional is suggested, further, by the level of wages which the European Companies had to pay to obtain 'coolie' labour. The standard one pagoda per month, paid through much of the second half of the eighteenth century, bought as much as 350 lbs of paddy in good seasons and even 200 lbs in the inflationary closing years of the century. Indeed, if employment could be found in and around the army, earnings possibilities were almost limitless. The Company paid soldiers a fabulous 1.75 pagodas a month plus *batta* and loot; and the pickings for servants, coolies, and carriers were not negligible either. Moreover, the Company's Madras army contained an exceptionally large number of members of the pariah castes.

Much of the discussion of wage rates during the eighteenth century has been dominated by concern for artisan groups, particularly weavers, who saw a decline in their real returns due to rising commodity prices and, especially, the efforts of the English East India Company to subordinate them to the rhythms and imperatives of capital (Arasaratnam 1980). There can be little doubt that they suffered seriously from the 1770s onwards as the Company drove out most of its competitors and established a more effective monopoly over cloth production. However, quality weavers belonging to traditional weaving castes represented the 'elite' of the industry, and one pressure upon them, perhaps ultimately enabling the Company to break their corporate power, came from the proliferating number of pariah weavers beneath them, able to produce a range of coarse cloths of lower returns. But what, for artisan weavers, might seem a reduction in their circumstances could represent, for pariah weavers, a considerable

increase in theirs. Even in the pinched conditions of the 1770s, weavers' wages regularly reached the equivalent of 240 lbs of paddy per month (Arasaratnam 1980).

The other side of this 'high-wage' economy, however, was constant danger. The climate was highly unstable; markets were extremely imperfect; and the fortunes of war blew hot and cold. In the event of famine—a continuous threat—notionally large wages and crop-shares might turn out to be worth nothing. Labourers must needs then turn to their patrons for protection and to see them through their difficulties. However, by the number of starving itinerants and vagrants who flooded into the fort and temple towns begging food and charity whenever crops failed, the generosity of regular patrons and employers was not particularly extensive and its quality suffered very little straining. Casualties during famines tended to be heavy, and composed, principally, of the 'labouring' and pariah classes.

There were, however, several mechanisms which tried to cope with these instabilities. The most important was the 'advance' which then, as later, seems to have operated at all and every level of the economic system. Would-be employers and deployers of capital advanced a share of costs of production to producers and workers. Late-nineteenth-century colonial authorities railed against the apparent 'oppressions' of this system in their time since it involved workers and producers in consumption debt and left them with very little 'freedom' of control over disposal of the final product. And, in late-nineteenth-century circumstances, the system probably was 'oppressive'. However, under eighteenth-century conditions, the balance of power between labour and capital appears to have been very different. In the first place, levels of advance in relation to production costs were extremely high. Early South Indian Collectors, for example, were horrified at the level of the *taccavi* obligations which they were supposed to take over from renters and tax-farmers, and which they frequently claimed, on precious little evidence, must be the result of fraud. 'Up-front' payments of more than 20 per cent of the expected value of the crop were demanded by 'ryots', as was further provision for cattle and irrigation repair (MDR Coimbatore 607, pp. 297–302). In the cloth trade, advances of 50 or more per cent of final value were by no means uncommon (Parthasarathi 1990a). Even with regard to the hiring of agricultural labourers, the star pagoda, two cloths, bag of salt, and sack of grain,

which were ritually handed over at the time of contracting, often had a combined value of a quarter or more of total expected annual payment (Baramahal Records VI, p. 27).

Second, ability of 'capital' to control both workers and the final product was also very limited, which increased 'risk'. Advances, once consumed on subsistence costs, were virtually irrecoverable in the event of market and production failures. Given peripatetic habits and possibilities, labour (including small peasants and artisans) responded to disaster simply by moving away (Ludden 1988). Equally, where market conditions were buoyant, it was difficult to prevent forward-contracted producers from selling their product to other merchants where they could get a better price (Arasaratnam 1990). Indeed, it was widely regarded as a customary right, at times forcefully defended, that the contracts implicit in advances could be abrogated at any time before delivery simply by return of the advance. In the cloth trade, for example, what this meant (as the Company found to its cost) was that a weaver might finance production from one merchant's advance but then sell the product to another for a better price and merely return the cash to his original 'employer'. The system of advances meant that 'capital' was involved in bearing a heavy share of risk—which, of course, was greatly to the benefit of labour.

Behind this balance of power, a number of forces and factors can be seen at work. A first was the low land:man ratio, which put the value of labour at a premium. One *adimai* convention, which earned the deep opprobrium of colonial authorities, was that of selling attached labourers along with rights to land. But this custom might be seen to reflect less labour oppression than the great value possessed by labour, since without labourers the land rights had little, if any, value. Only in a few deltaic tracts was the guaranteed productive potential of any piece of land so great that it could command, and hold down, labour in long-term relations of apparent subservience. Elsewhere, land and landholders were chasing labourers and offering substantial shares in the social product for their services. Added to this, and as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has argued, there was a long-term trend in secular economic expansion, which must have involved an increasing demand for labour in the growing 'urban' commercial and manufacturing sectors of the economy (Subrahmanyam 1989).

Second, the structure of the state, and its ambiguous relationship to

many forms of 'private' capital, made it difficult to erect structures of control capable of systematically compelling and coercing labour. By the eighteenth century, the South Indian state was a great deal more 'centralized' than any residual images of 'segmentation' might suggest. But the processes of centralization had promoted territorial divisions and competition between various regional and local authorities. This competition extended into the field of labour recruitment, with rulers attempting to lure the workforce of their neighbours into their own territories and thus beating up the price of labour (Washbrook and Stein 1991). Of course, another side to this policy was a determination, sometimes backed with the use of savage penal violence, to keep their own workforces at home. But no state as yet possessed the bureaucratic apparatus necessary to sustain this coercion systematically: the occasional bouts of ritualized brutality, which many Europeans recorded and took as characteristic of the enfeebled position of labour in relation to 'Oriental Despotism', might be seen to mark the weakness of South Indian state authority rather than its strength.

Contributing to this weakness too was the uncertain relationship between the possessors of capital and the authority of the state. On the one hand, it was plainly in the interests of the emergent 'mercantilist' states of this epoch to secure more firmly the control of merchant capitalists over producers and production. Indeed, as cash became ever more central to the reproduction of military power, this was less an interest than a requisite. However, the ruler's concern was to maximize his own returns from the development of commerce, not the levels of profit being retained by merchant capital itself. Hence, there was not only co-operation between ruler and merchant but also much conflict: conflict in which merchant capitalists lined up with and protected the independent rights of producers, along with themselves, against the increasing demands and encroachments of the state (Washbrook and Stein 1991). Revenue farmers and monopoly licensees by no means always found it in their interests to maximize the powers of exploitation notionally lent them by the state, and the rewards of labour expanded in the interstices of this conflict.

But third, and perhaps most importantly, labour at virtually all levels of the economic system was corporately organized and capable of putting up its own fierce resistance. This is most obvious in the

case of those forms of labour which possessed greatest independent resources of 'skill' and 'tooling'. Specialist weaving groups, for example, showed their corporate power on the Andhra coast in the 1720s and 1730s: the four principal castes organized strikes against the East India Company's attempts to beat down the price of cloth, and, according to Prasannan Parthasarathi, successfully sustained the product share of weaving against reductions in the profit margins to spinning and merchandizing (Parthasarathi 1990a). Equally, in interior districts, peasant clan organization strongly resisted the attempts of 'military fiscalist' states to increase the share of the product extracted from them as revenue. In the riverine tracts, matters were more complicated by the extent to which dominant landholding corporations had long been penetrated by a commercial land market: in areas such as the Kaveri and Godaveri deltas, village landholding rights were parcelled out between families of promiscuous origin and identity. However, the ideology and symbology of 'joint' *kaniachikarrar* possession continued to hold, and, ultimately, managed to force even the early Company state to abandon its original intentions of imposing individualist 'ryotwari' settlements on these regions (Ludden 1985).

But corporate principles of organization reached much deeper down the labour and production processes than this, embracing even 'landless' and 'untouchable' labour. No class of labour was held to be entirely without specialist skills or resources or rights. Indeed, the social relations of production might be conceptualized as consisting of the intersection of several tiers of right-bearing and corporately organized labour, each with independent, though differential, claims to a share in the social product. In the case of 'untouchable' labouring groups, outside a few deltaic tracts where relations similar to those of village-based nineteenth-century caste 'domination' seem already to have existed, most belonged to wider territorial corporations, which protected their 'skills' and even negotiated their price. This was most obviously true of tank-diggers, shepherds, artisans, and ritual specialists. But, over most of the South, it included also common agricultural labourers. In Chingleput in the 1780s, for example, most farm labourers were hired formally on seasonal contracts (which might, of course, be renewed annually through an entire or several lifetimes). At the end of each season, labouring families ritually 'withdrew' from their employers' villages, waiting to be 'invited' back for re-hiring at

festivals involving role reversals and 'king-for-a-day' celebrations. Behind this independence, there lay influential 'caste' organizations, which showed their power in these years by orchestrating territorially extensive labour strikes against attempts by the Company to increase taxation on the social product and thus to reduce the effective shares available to labour (Sivakumar 1978, ch. 5).

In other contexts, too, the 'power' possessed by pariahs was widely manifested. Early Company officials were particularly afraid of the violence wrought by uprisings of pariahs during famine and dearth, and, as in the Masulipatnam famine of 1790, intervened extensively in the grain market and to distribute food in order to preserve social order. Market reports suggesting the imminence of food shortages and high prices were checked against the 'restlessness' of pariah groups (MDR Masulipatnam 2799, pp. 512–14). These fears reflected the extent to which pariahs frequently possessed the reputation of being 'hard men' with attributes of physical strength and an aptitude for violence. In religious festivals, not only were they given the heavy duties of pulling the massive carts on which rode the deities (who, on these occasions at least, do not seem to have objected to the proximity of the unclean), but they were used as the shock-troops of caste factionalism. Invariably, reports on riots between castes of the 'Left-' and 'Right-hand' noted that, when Right-hand factions mobilized for violence, pariah castes (who mostly belonged to the Right) took up, or were pushed, into forward positions and led the charge (Military Sundries 88, pp. 1–307, Tamilnadu Archives).

To a degree of course, their very 'uncleanness' may have given them power since, from the perspective of 'clean' Left-hand castes, they possessed—and were—poisoned weapons. The Company noticed and made use of this when employing pariah troops: they were held to be particularly good for tax-collecting duties since the upper-caste wealthy would often pay up on the spot just to keep them out of their houses. This sense of 'uncleanness', however, did not derive only from varna notions of purity: also and, in most Tamil contexts probably more importantly, it derived from the extent to which pariahs were associated with the forces of untamed nature and the spirit world residing in the 'barbarous' forests, which surrounded and pressed in on agricultural settlements. Low-caste groups were held to be migrants from the forest world (even when they had been settled for

generations) and, in Tamilnad no less than in Prakash's Bihar, much of the ritual symbology of pariah identity emphasized and sustained myths of these 'fearsome' origins (for Bihar, see Prakash 1990).

It is also by no means impossible that, besides being mythologically 'wild', many groups of pariahs in the eighteenth century were, in fact, extremely strong physically. Recent work on low-caste diets in Tamilnadu has suggested that a major reason for their present fragile physiological condition lies in the poor nutrition obtained from the 'broken' and inferior quality rice on which most agricultural labourers now subsist. In the eighteenth century, by contrast, pariah diet, even in rice-growing areas, seems to have consisted much more of millets and dry grains, which, though inferior in status, were far more nutritious. Also, more extensive pastoralism meant the easier availability of meat. Certainly, the officers of the Company army did not notice any generalized 'physical debasement' among pariah groups but recruited them extensively for 'fighting' as well as menial duties.

III

It is against this broad background of eighteenth-century labour conditions that I wish to argue the case for the closing decades of that century having been something of a 'Golden Age' for pariahs and for labouring groups. This golden age, however, did not last, and, by the early years of the nineteenth century agricultural labour's long march into 'modern' destitution and despoliation was already under way. Familiarly, the second half of the eighteenth century has been seen as a period of intensified warfare and 'disturbance' occasioned by the breakup of the Mughal empire and the subsequent struggle for succession between a variety of regional states. Habib has taken the conditions of disturbance to have been detrimental to the interests of labour and the poor in general, and no doubt they were for a substantial group of the 'middling-poor'—such as landholding peasants and skilled artisans (Habib 1964). However, for those groups who had been at the very bottom of the *ancien regime's* social order, the epoch offered a number of rare opportunities. In the first place, and most simply, the wars of the period increased the demand for labour of a wide variety of kinds. Armies need fortifications, whose building regularly stripped the surrounding countryside of tank-diggers and other construction workers. They also needed servants in

large numbers with, by contemporary estimates, six labourers being needed to keep one cavalryman and his horse in the field. As there may have been as many as a quarter of a million cavalrymen south of the Vindhyas in these years, potential sources of employment were not scarce. Armies also needed transport workers, their baggage trains frequently stretching for twenty or more miles behind them. And some armies, such as that of the Company, even needed soldiers from among the pariah classes. Of course, and hardly surprisingly, many efforts were made by the military to obtain this labour—without paying for it—through ‘pressing’, ‘corvee levies’, and the like. But the disturbed political conditions worked against the successful application of coercive control and, in the end, most rulers found themselves having to spend lavishly to meet their needs. During the 1770s, Tipu Sultan was thought to have been spending two crores of pagodas a year on the defences of Seringapatnam. As noted earlier, the Company paid its (often pariah) sepoys well over the odds for common labourers.

But the political conflicts of the period were fought out as much for economic as for military superiority. The ‘mercantilist’ or ‘fiscalist’ states of the era competed against one another for trade, cash, and to feed their increasingly mercenary and expensive armies. In several different ways, their competition would offer benefits to labour. First, it bid up the price of inducements to workers to shift their location. Between the 1760s and 1780s, for example, Hyder Ali spent heavily on irrigation works at the headwaters of the Kaveri, and offered favourable terms to all migrant cultivators, especially from ‘enemy’ Tanjavur downriver. Second, commercial production expanded, creating new opportunities for labouring groups. The East India Company, for example, started to concentrate on high-quality long cloth, and sought to expand production of this variety at the expense of others. Such cloth was produced by the most skilled and specialized of weaving groups who, in turn, increased their own demand for fine yarn. Most classes of the rural population had performed spinning as an important by-employment during the slack parts of the agricultural season. However, the new levels of demand meant that spinning could become a specialized occupation in its own right. In the Company’s Chingleput weaving parganas by the 1770s, for example, whole villages of pariahs had been established to service the provision of yarn at the expense of other agricultural duties (Diary of C. Smith in MPP, 1771). Further, demand for other, coarser, varieties of cloth also increased: French and

Dutch traders sought 'blues' for the Caribbean and South East Asian slave markets, and indigenous demand, perhaps related to expanding armies and court centres, also grew. Such cloth could be made by less skilled pariah weavers, and, with the Company using increasingly coercive methods to hold 'professional' weavers to its obligations, large parts of the coarse-cloth market became available to pariah interlopers. In some parts of Andhra, for example, it was reported that Company weavers leased their looms to pariahs at night so that the latter could produce coarse varieties (MDR Godavari 830, pp. 1-64).

The growing demand for labour 'off' the land—in 'service' and 'industry'—inevitably affected the supply of labour in agriculture itself. As low-caste groups deserted the land to follow armies and occupy towns, the bargaining position of those remaining tended to improve. An examination of village records reveals many shifts in the distribution of rights over these years. In Chingleput, where Brahmans had usually let the lands in their villages to Pali hereditary tenants, the latter were frequently able to force an entry to full 'mirasi' status. In much of Mysore, Brahman *inamdars* 'sold' shares in their privileged rights to tenants and labourers in order to keep the latter on the land (MDR Chingleput 448, pp. 30-58). Occasionally, direct military conflict further aided this process. Famously, in 1780 the Mysore army invaded 'downriver' Northern Tanjavur and force-marched back a large number of its 'principal inhabitants' along with their cattle, personal 'slaves', and agricultural implements, in order to populate the newly-irrigated waters of the upper Kaveri. What this did in Northern Tanjavur itself, however, was to give the 'sub-principal' inhabitants, who managed to escape or were left behind, direct access to the land. In this context, even a number of pariah groups contrived, albeit often briefly, to gain vaunted 'mirasidar' status and rights for themselves.

Structural shifts in the relationship between several of the different privileged corporations of *ancien regime* society helped further to increase the pressures from below. While, at one level, military rulers, merchant capitalists and land- and resource-holders shared interests in the development of commerce, at another level they were daggers drawn over the distribution of its profits. Major conflicts periodically broke out between rulers, merchants, and labour-controllers (landlords, 'head' artisans, and so on), conflicts from which the poorer labouring elements could gain. In the cloth trade, for example, the

Company progressively weakened the position of merchants and head-weavers, and, for a time, offered securer conditions of employment to common weavers than they had previously enjoyed (Parthasarathi 1990b). In Malabar, Tipu Sultan's ferocious attack on Nayar and Nambudiri privileges drove the latter groups out of their homes and into hiding, and temporarily offered the land (and the protections of Islam) to their 'slaves' and labourers. In Karnataka proper, Tipu's various manoeuvrings were aimed at breaking the privileges of the 'dominant' and seeking direct alliances between the state and the subordinate corporations of society. Theoretically at least, his 'ryotwari' system would have offered land on a direct and individual basis to whomever would take it, regardless of caste or status. In its own way too, the Company was reaching beneath the structure of privilege in South Indian society by offering pariahs levels of reward and status (especially in the army), which social convention denied them, and using them to 'attack' superior vested interests (MDR Tanjore 3267, pp. 81-5).

For a brief period, then, and as many contemporaries claimed, the world appeared to be turning on its head: with pariahs and other ne'er-do-wells owning land and wealth and developing social pretensions, while Brahmans and respectable people were murdered in their beds and chased by marauding armies. But the world was soon to turn right-side up again and, 'the golden age of the pariah' was destined not to last. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, most of the political and economic conditions sustaining the new order had collapsed. In part, as Christopher Bayly has seen, this collapse followed from the logic of the Company's achievement of 'imperial' supremacy. The several court and military centres, whose rivalry had generated competitive market forces, were dismantled to give way to a single imperial authority, which could better monopolize and monopsonize the economy. The Company's supremacy meant a generalized demilitarization and a paring down of the overblown service sector which had been so important in stimulating demand. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to labour in agriculture for want of other opportunities. Labour's price on the land soon began to fall (Bayly 1983).

In the weaving industry, the new situation also meant that the Company finally managed to dominate artisanal corporations,

obliging them to produce its cloth cheaply and cutting out much of the coarse-cloth production which had offered employment to pariah (Arasaratnam 1980). From 1830, the weaving industry received another near-mortal blow with the abandonment of the 'investment' and the opening up of the high-quality market to foreign competition. These factors, together with the export of specie, induced a swing into depression which lay over the economy until the 1850s, and reflected a reduced demand for everything, including labour.

But it was not simply the functioning of 'impersonal' market forces which pushed the lower levels of South Indian society back from their most recent gains; nor were they pushed back merely to their subordinate position of about 1740. Rather, they fell back as a result of deliberate Company policies aimed at reducing their independence and share in the social product; and they fell back to positions of domination and exploitation which they had scarcely known earlier. These policies were couched in the familiar, and apparently contradictory, terms of most Company policies at the time: an inchoate mixture of desires to 'restore' South Indian society to its proper basis in the 'ancient Hindu' order, and, simultaneously, to reform and modernize it for participation in the nineteenth-century world economy. The contradictions, however, are easily resolved when their implications for the situation of labour are considered.

In contrast perhaps to Bayly's North India, it would be less possible to argue that the political conflicts of the eighteenth century had not affected the performance of the economic base. In certain important areas, the struggles between contending mercantilist powers had led to the destruction of irrigation works, the dispersal of artisanal populations, and the decline of trade. Moreover, and even more certainly, these conditions had created, and reflected, a serious crisis in the profitability of capital, which had to bear heavier risks and distribute a larger share of surplus to labour. On assuming 'imperial' power, the Company set out both to expand valuable forms of production (which, for it, meant mostly agricultural production) and to increase the profit levels achieved by capital. This involved a marked change in its attitudes towards labour.

In its earliest days as an Indian regional power, in the manner of other mercantilist states of the period, it had found itself brought into conflict with many of the dominant corporations controlling the

largest shares of the social product. From Tipu Sultan, it borrowed the radical 'ryotwari' revenue system, and even when, as from 1795 to 1805, it toyed with the idea of a Permanent Settlement, it proposed setting levels of revenue demand so high that they would soak the possessing classes. The new position of authority which it enjoyed after 1805, however, began to suggest the need for a new perspective, especially with regard to agriculture (in the sphere of commerce, it continued to be deeply suspicious of mercantile and banking corporations, and sought to displace their functions with those of its own bureaucracy and the allied interests of British capital). While, notionally, agriculture could be expanded by pure ryotwari means (giving the land directly to whomever would labour on it), the reality was rather different. Agricultural development needed capital and, if the Company were to cut out the more privileged corporations on the land, it must needs provide all that capital itself. The logic of the early ryotwari settlements proposed this, with the revenue authorities obliged for heavy investments in irrigation and *taccavi*. But the risks were high and the Company soon began to look for ways to encourage 'private' capital back into agriculture, and hence for means of re-accommodating the privileged classes. In some regions, there were other reasons for doing this too. In North Tanjavur and Malabar, Tipu's policies had driven off large sections of the erstwhile privileged classes. On the principle of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', these groups had to have their positions restored lest it appear that the Company cared little for fellow victims of Tipu's 'tyranny'.

The re-enfranchisement of the privileged classes, of course, had serious implications for the lesser-privileged and labouring groups who had gained from the former's plight. In many places, most notably North Tanjavur and Malabar, '*mirasidars*' and '*jenmis*' returned after absences of a decade or more, to take back, with Company authority, the lands and rights which others had enjoyed. Equally, the Company started to scrutinize village records and, especially, *inam* grants to hunt out 'imposters' who had, 'illegitimately' by its understanding of 'tradition', bought into or acquired rights given in the distant past by gods, kings, and temples. Again here, many of the gains of the later eighteenth century were taken away.

But mere 'restoration' of the ancient Hindu order was never going to be enough. The Company of necessity demanded a far higher share

of surplus than any previous state and, if its share was to be found and 'privileged' groups on the land were still to have some material underpinnings to their privilege, somebody else must pay. Eventually, the 'deal' brokered between the Company and the variety of *mirasidars*, *inamdars*, and 'village headman' with whom it effectively treated, centred on the progressive destruction of labour's independence and rights and share in the social product.

This took many forms, some invoking 'tradition', others involving the modern laws of contract. In response to the petitions of local *mirasidars* that labour was too scarce and expensive for them to extend cultivation, the Madras army decided that it was now against custom for pariahs to be employed as Company soldiers, dismissed those in its ranks, and agreed not to hire any more. Equally, in 1797 after several painful battles with pariah caste organizations centred on Madras city, the Collector of the Chingleput Jaghir persuaded his colleagues in the city that such organizations could not be broken while Madras acted as a haven of alternative opportunity and employment for erstwhile agricultural labour (MDR Chingleput 448, pp. 30–58). He urged that laws be passed to eject casual labourers from the city, and this policy soon spread to most other major towns as well. In sharp contrast to the eighteenth century (when pariahs may have constituted one-third of the population of Madras city), by the late nineteenth century untouchables represented barely ten per cent of urban populations. Further, in several districts and in spite of the fact that to do so was technically illegal, Collectors put the local authorities to work in capturing and returning 'runaway' slaves. Indeed, the law itself began to become involved in this task albeit by disguised means; while the courts showed a characteristic British ambivalence towards recognizing indigenous 'slavery', they certainly allowed that 'debtors' could be forcibly restrained. As (due as much to the 'advance' system as anything else) all labourers were technically in debt to their employers, the courts thus were able to issue notices of constraint against most 'runaways' while not formally committing themselves to the legality of 'slavery'.

But perhaps the most devastating long-term blow to the position of labour was the convention established by the courts, in the wake of attempt to institutionalize 'landed' property, that non-real rights, such as claims to grain shares, were not enforceable at law, and that

agricultural wages ought to be determined by the laws of supply and demand (which, of course, were 'natural' laws determined by God and with which the laws of Man had no business interfering). At a stroke this abrogated, or at least rendered unenforceable, an enormous class of rights previously possessed by labour, and, in the context of depression, loss of alternative employment and an enforced movement of population back to the land, guaranteed the driving down of the price of labour.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the pattern of the future had clearly been set; or rather the baseline of 'tradition', whence later nineteenth century changes could be judged as progress, had been laid. The first wage censuses of the 1860s revealed levels of payment to labour whose grain equivalents, if more regularly received, were far less—sometimes half—those common in the eighteenth century; and which, given the expansion of production, represented a substantial reduction in relative shares of the social product (Kumar 1965). Equally, the first regular survey of *inams* (in 1869) told the story of a veritable revolution from above: whereas, for example, Munro's first (1804) *inam* survey of the Ceded Districts had shown the 'village officer' class holding only 22 per cent of *inam* rights, and a huge miscellaneous population of village servants and labourers holding a substantial share of the rest, by 1869 the former had come to enjoy nearly 70 per cent of such rights and the latter hardly any at all (Stein 1984). Further, labour's habitual mobility, which had done so much to sustain its price, had been reduced to the point at which, in the first general census of 1871, over 96 per cent of the people of the Madras Presidency were found to be living in the districts in which they had been born.

Nor was it only changing material relations which altered the situation of labour. The expansion of cultivation and the reciprocal cutting back of the forests, besides reducing the scope of pastoralism, also removed pariahs further from the sources of 'barbarous wildness' whence they had drawn much of their mystique and metaphorical strength. In concert with the 'Brahmanization' of caste ideology, then taking place also under British influence, this created a context in which pariahs became, culturally as well as physically, the 'unclean' and degenerative sub-humanoid species, which caste society in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries held them unequivocally to be

(Barnett 1975). The instruments of 'capitalist' modernization and of Indian tradition had combined perfectly to produce, for the property-holding classes of colonial India, the kind of dominated labour force that they and their white masters most needed and wanted.

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The following abbreviations have been used:

IESHR: *Indian Economic and Social History Review*

IOL: India Office Library and Records.

MDR: Madras District Records, Tamilnadu and Andhrapradesh Archives.

MPP: Madras Public Proceedings, India Office Library.

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2

The Original Caste

Power, History and Hierarchy in South Asia*

NICHOLAS B. DIRKS

Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown and what was manifested and, paradoxically, found the principle of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force. Those on whom it was exercised could remain in the shade; they received light only from that portion of power that was conceded to them, or from the reflection of it that for a moment they carried.—Foucault 1979: 187

The Politics of Caste

In pre-colonial Hindu India, the king—both as a historical figure and as a trope for the complex political dynamics underlying the Indian social order—was a central ordering factor in the social organization of caste. This statement directly opposes the prevailing theories of comparative sociology, and in particular the theoretical position of Louis Dumont (1980). As is well known, Dumont holds that the political and economic domains of social life in India are encompassed by the religious. The religious principle becomes articulated in terms of the opposition of purity and impurity. For Dumont, the Brahman represents the religious principle, inasmuch

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as the Brahman represents the highest form of purity attainable by Hindus. The king, while important and powerful, represents the political domain, and is accordingly inferior to, and encompassed by, the Brahman.

There are in fact many textual confirmations of the view that Brahmans, and the spiritual authority (*brahma*) that they possess, are seen as higher, both relationally and ontologically, than kings, and the temporal authority (*ksatra*) that is theirs. However, these same texts provide evidence as well of what has been called 'the central conundrum of Indian social ideology' (Trautmann 1981: 285; also see Heesterman 1978). At times the king is above the Brahman, as for example in the royal consecration ceremony. At other times the Brahman appears to be superior to the king, as for example in the *Manu Dharmasastra*, and in passages from the *Mahabharata*. This conundrum is often addressed in terms of the postulation of two levels of truth, a higher level at which the Brahman is clearly pre-eminent, the source of everything else, and a lower level at which kings must protect and sponsor Brahmans in order for them to exist, as gods, on earth. Dumont's resolution of this conundrum extends the notions of higher and lower truths from a classically Indic epistemological contextuality to his well-known ontological separation of the religious from the political. The major development of political thought in India, he contends, is the secularization of kingship, that is, the separation of the magico-religious nature of kingship—preserved in the form of the royal chaplain in particular and in the function of Brahmans in the larger polity more generally—from the political aspects of kingship, depicted, *inter alia*, in the Machiavellian *Arthasastra* (Dumont 1962).

While Dumont is not wrong to insist on radical differences in the 'ideologies' of India and the West, the irony is that the way in which he postulates the difference is based on a fundamentally Western ideology, in which religion and politics must be separated. Dumont's position in many ways caricatures the Orientalist assumption that India is the spiritual East, devoid of history, untouched by the politics of Oriental despotisms. Critics of Dumont have often accepted his basic epistemological premises, but then reversed them. They take a materialist perspective and view social relations in India in terms of power, pure and simple (e.g. Berreman 1971). Recent work—often

by those influenced by an ethnosociological approach to the study of India—has suggested that this separation of religion from politics, like many other dichotomies in Western social science, is inappropriate at the level of ideological (or cultural) analysis in Indian social thought (Appadurai 1981; Dirks 1982, 1987; Marriott and Inden 1977; McGilvray 1982). It is in this sense—and in particular in my analysis of the cultural poetics of power—that the following analysis is ethnosociological.

Not only is there no fundamental ontological separation of a 'religious' from a 'political' domain, but religious institutions and activities are fundamental features of what we describe here as the political system. Kings derive much of their power from worship, and bestow their emblems and privileges in a cultural atmosphere that is permeated by the language and attitudes of worship. Further, temples are key institutions in the formation of social communities (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976), even while they reflect structures of power worked out both in and outside their own walls (Dirks 1987; 285–305, 358–83). In turn, temples represent the pre-eminent position of the king by granting him the highest honour in the temple, before even the learned (*srotriya*) Brahman. Religion does not encompass kingship any more than kingship encompasses religion. There are not two distinct forms of power, secular power had by kings and sacred power had by Brahmans. Kings and Brahmans are both privileged but by different forms of divinity in a world in which all beings were, however distantly, generated from the same ontological source. And power—whether defined as a constellation of cultural conceits or as an analytic concern—cannot be restricted to a single domain of Indian social life.

Dumont has suggested that caste is fundamentally religious, and that religious principles actualize themselves in the domain of purity and pollution. In my ethnohistorical study of a south Indian kingdom in which Kallars were the royal caste and Brahmans were heavily patronized according to scripturally mandated forms of royal gifting activity, I have found that purity and pollution are not the primary relational coordinates which endow hierarchy with its meaning and substance. Royal honour (*mariyatai*, *antastu*) combined with the notions of restriction, command, and order (*kattupatu*, *atikaram*, *orunku*) are the key discursive components which are embedded in, and productive of, the nature and order of hierarchical relations.

My analysis will, I hope, do more than simply contest Dumont over the issue of which key terms underlie the structural logic of hierarchy in South Asia. Indeed, I wish to reintroduce concerns with power, hegemony, and history into studies of culturally constructed structures of thought, whether structuralist or ethnosociological. The forms and relations of power in southern India efface social scientific distinctions of materialist etics from culturalist emics, for even an analysis of ritual action and language suggests the complex and conjunctural foundations of hierarchical relations. At least this is true among the Kallars of Pudukkottai, less affected perhaps than most other groups by colonialism and the demise of the old regime in the nineteenth century. For the concerns of comparative sociology are not only the products of a nineteenth-century Orientalism, but also of the colonial intervention that removed the politics from society and created a contradictory form of civil society—with caste as its fundamental institution—in its place. It was not only convenient to render caste independent of political variables, but necessary to do so in order to rule an immensely complex society by a variety of indirect means. Colonial sociology represented the eighteenth century as decadent, and all legitimate Indian politics as past. Under colonialism, caste was appropriated, and in many respects reinvented, by the British (see Dirks 1989). However, the British were able to change caste because caste continued to be permeable to political influence. Ethnohistorical reconstruction is thus important not only for historians confronting new problems of data and analysis, but for anthropologists who confront in their fieldwork a social system that was decapitated by colonial rule.

Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom

The Kallars, like the Maravars, settled in mixed economy zones (Ludden 1985) such as Pudukkottai on the borders of the central political and economic regions of the south. In these areas they quickly attained dominance in late medieval times by exercising rights of protection (*patikkaval*) over local communities and institutions. The Kallars were successful in this role because their strong kin- and territory-based social structure and cultural valuation of heroism and honour were highly conducive to the corporate control of the means of violence and coercion. It was no accident that Kallars, like Maravars,

were often, when not granted rights of protection, the very groups from which others sought protection.

The Tondaiman dynasty of Kallar kings wrested control over a significant swathe of the Pudukkottai region in central Tamil Nadu in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Whereas Kallars had been branded as thieves in much early Tamil literature and as criminals by the British under the Criminal Tribes Act, in Pudukkottai—a little kingdom that became the only Princely State in the Tamil-speaking region of southern India—they became the royal caste. Kallars controlled much of the land, occupied the greatest number of authoritative positions, particularly as village and locality headmen and as *miracidars*, and ran the most important temples as trustees. These temples were often their lineage, village, or sub-caste-territorial (*natu*) temples, in which they received honours only after the king and Brahmans. In short, Kallars were dominant not only in terms of their numbers, but for economic, political, and ritual reasons.

Pudukkottai, which at its most extensive did not exceed 1200 square miles, was located in an exclusively rainfed agricultural zone right in the middle of the Tamil-speaking region of southern India, straddling the boundary between what had been the two great medieval Tamil kingdoms. Ruled by Kallar kings, it provides an excellent place to test many of the proposals of Dumont, who, before he shaped the concerns of much contemporary Indian anthropology in his general proposals and in *Homo hierarchicus*, portrayed Kallars in his major ethnographic work in India as a ritually marginal group that exemplified the Dravidian isolation of kinship from the influence of caste hierarchy. But in Pudukkottai, less than one hundred miles north of where Dumont conducted his fieldwork, Kallars were *kings*; they exercised every conceivable kind of dominance and their social organization reflects this fact.

Pudukkottai rose, as did other little kingdoms throughout southern India, within the context of a late medieval Hindu political order. In both its emergence to and its maintenance of power, it exemplified the social and military vitality of certain productively marginal areas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period that has commonly been characterized as one of decline and decadence. But the eighteenth century was not the 'black century'; the decentralization of political forms was neither a condemnation of the capabilities of the Indian

state nor a natural prelude to British colonial rule (see Bayly 1983). The British conquest of the little kings in the south was anything but absent-minded, and there are indications that not only was the economy buoyant in part because of the active court centres ruled by these little kings, but the small and local-level states were learning the political, military, and administrative lessons that the French and the English were learning at the same time. But win the British did, and thus their version of the eighteenth century has collaborated with a subsequent neglect of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Western and Indian historians to provide the grist for comparative sociology's Indian mill.

Colonialism purposefully preserved many of the forms of the old regime, nowhere more conspicuously than in the indirectly ruled Princely States. But these forms were frozen, and only the appearances of the old regime (without its vitally connected political and social processes) were saved. Colonialism changed things both more and less than has commonly been thought. While introducing new forms of civil society and separating these forms from the colonial state, colonialism also arrested some of the immediate disruptions of change by preserving many elements of the old regime. But by freezing the wolf in sheep's clothing it changed things fundamentally. Paradoxically, colonialism seems to have created much of what is now accepted as Indian 'tradition', including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly at the head, village-based systems of exchange, isolated ceremonial residues of the old regime state, and fetishistic competition for ritual goods that no longer played a vital role in the political system.

In my research on Pudukkottai, it took little study of local land records to uncover the most surprising historical characteristic of the political system: how little of the land was taxed (Dirks 1979). According to mid-nineteenth-century records, less than 30 per cent of the cultivated land was either taxed (9 per cent) or given out from year to year on a share basis (18 per cent) in which one-ninth of the produce was accorded to village servants and four-ninths each to the cultivator and the government. Seventy per cent of the cultivated land was *inam* or tax-free. This mid-nineteenth-century statistic was, if anything, far higher in the eighteenth century, when there were at the very least another 5000 military *inams*, i.e. 40 per cent more than the total

number of *inams* in the mid-nineteenth century, before the gradual dismantlement of the military system of the state. Roughly 30 per cent of the *inams* (numbers of *inam* units rather than acreage) were for military retainers, their chiefs, and for palace guards and servants; 25 per cent were for village officers, artisans, and servants; and the remaining 45 per cent were for the support of temples, monasteries, rest and feeding houses for Brahman priests and pilgrims, and land grants to Brahman communities. In terms of acreage, roughly 19 per cent of the alienated land was for military retainers and others, 7 per cent for village officers, artisans, and servants, 51 per cent for temples, monasteries, and charities, and 22 per cent for Brahmans. Remember that these statistics reflect a demilitarized political system, so that both the numbers and percentages had earlier been far higher for military categories. Remember also that this particular kingdom was ruled over by kings said by most observers to be an unclean caste, inappropriate for Hindu kingship, and therefore inappropriate donors for Sanskrit temples and Brahmans.

This structure of privileged landholding reflects the structure of political power and socio-cultural participation within state and village institutions. The chief landholders were the great Kallar Jagirdars and Cervaikarars. The former were collateral relations of the Raja. Jagir estates were created for the two brothers of the Raja after a succession dispute in 1730 severely threatened the stability of the state. These collateral families kept these estates intact until their settlement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The jagirs were, in effect, mini kingdoms in their own right, each containing a small court and a full set of *inam* grants, including 'military ones'. Importantly, however, the jagirs were not made up of contiguous villages and were therefore never geographically isolable units.

Just below the Jagirdars came the Cervaikarars. All but one of the Cervaikarars were of the same sub-caste as the Raja, and most had one or more affinal ties with the royal family. The Cervaikarars were given large grants of land, titles, honours, and emblems. Each of the Cervaikarars was awarded a specified number of retainers, or Amarakarars, to serve them at home, to go to battle with them abroad, and to carry their honours and emblems to ritual occasions in the royal court and in temples. Lesser chiefs, called Kurikarars, came from Kallar sub-castes other than the royal one. Lands and privileges throughout the state were also given to other Kallars, called in diminutive form

Cervais, to keep watch over villages and localities not dominated by loyal Kallars (i.e. all groups other than the Vicenki Nattu Kallars who were only finally brought under nominal control in a series of wars in the late eighteenth century). The Cervais were mostly members of the royal sub-caste who had no affinal ties with the royal family.

The royal family and court was itself protected by Uriyakarars, all of whom were Akampatiyars, members of a non-Kallar caste which was aligned with the Kallars through membership in a metacaste of three warrior groups along with the Maravars called *mukkulattur*. These royal protectors in fact became a separate caste marked off from other Akampatiyars in the region by virtue of their connection with and service to the Raja. A number of Uriyakarar chiefs had a prominent role in the kingdom. Like most of the lesser chiefs, these chiefs were given extensive lands but no formal group of military retainers under them.

In addition, within each village in the state, headmen were given lands in recognition of their rights of local authority as well as to render this representative of the state's power at large. These headmen came from the locally dominant castes. Kallars were dominant in the northern and eastern parts of the state. Maravars had a significant presence in the south. *Ampalams* (the title for headman, literally meaning the central common ground of the village, used by most of the castes in Pudukkottai) were also called *miracidars* after the mid-eighteenth century. This new label, borrowed from Persian revenue terminology, was used in an attempt to render local authority as dependent as possible on recognition by the 'bureaucratic' state. Nonetheless, well into the twentieth century these local headmen were often as powerful as small kings, with retinues and legends sufficient to cause their power to be felt over significant areas of the countryside.

Various village officials, artisans, and servants were also given *inam* (more properly *maniyam*) lands by the state. In addition to this land, each village servant was also rewarded with shares of the village grain heap. Since the one-ninth share of the harvest that was owed to village servants was taken from the grain heap before its division into the Raja's and the village's share, this classic *jajmani* payment was borne equally by the village and the Raja. Thus, the sets of relations usually characterized as *jajmani*, that is, as an institution of the village community alone, were sanctioned and underwritten not only by the community but also by the king both through *inams* and the share

system. *Maniyam*, the term used for many village grants, meant land that was held free of tax, as well as privilege in a more general sense. *Maniyam* derives from the Sanskrit word *manya*, which means honour and privilege. Many of the land grants to Brahmans were called *carvamaniyam*, meaning completely tax-free and honourable. However, the term *maniyam* was not reserved for Brahmans, as British categories which separated 'religious' from 'non-religious' grant implied. Indeed, in its least marked form *maniyam* was something used for *inams* in general. *Maniyam* was also used in a marked sense for land grants given to village servants whose task was to maintain and operate irrigation facilities, to village officers or headmen, to the *pujaris* or priests of small village temples or shrines, and to *inamdars* (holders of *inams*) who had such variable responsibilities as blowing the conch for a village festival or tending a flower garden which produced garlands for the village deities. These *maniyams* reveal that royal grants sustained the entire structure of local village ritual.

Even small locality temples were linked to the king through the *inam*. These local temples organized the ritual systems of villages, often constituting some of its fundamental cultural coordinates as well: they demarcated boundaries, centres, the relationships of social groups within the village, defining and internally ranking lineages, sub-castes, and castes. Service to the temple was in many respects structurally equivalent to service to the village community, even as most village service *inams* specified services to both temples and the village, as suggested for Sri Lanka as well in the work of Hocart (1950: 44), who saw each village service group as a priesthood, and thus saw caste as an institution that was simultaneously political and religious.

In addition to many *inams* granted to village and local temples in the form of *maniyams* to local priests and village servants, many *inam* grants were also made to Brahmans, temples, and charities of various sorts. As is well known, the principal sources for south Indian historiography are epigraphical records of such grants, publicly proclaimed because of the merit which accrued to the donors from them and because of the centrality of these gifts to the ideology of kingship. One of the fundamental requirements of Indic kingship was that the king be a munificent provider of fertile lands for Brahmans who would study and chant the Vedas, perform sacrifices, and provide ritual services for the king so as to ensure and protect his prosperity and that of his kingdom; for temples which were the centres of worship

and for festivals such as Dassara which renewed the sovereignty of the king and regenerated the kingdom; and for *cattirams* (*chatrams*, also called *choultries*, which were feeding, sometimes lodging, houses for pilgrims) which provided sustenance and shelter for itinerant Brahmans and pilgrims. The merit (*punyam*) of the king who made the grant could be shared by all those who protected the gift, a duty enjoined upon all subsequent kings. In spite of Pudukkottai's marginal social and political position, it was well endowed with temples and Brahmanic institutions precisely because of the prevailing force of royal ideology.

The underlying political base of any little kingdom in the old regime was its military capacity. This capacity was in turn based on structures of alliance and command, which were articulated by gifts, privileges, of varying kinds, and kinship. No little kingdom could survive if it did not have an efficient system of military mobilization. These systems were organized around subordinate chieftains, connubial connections, and privileged landholding rather than a centralized or bureaucratically organized system of revenue collection and military rule. Royal grants helped to sustain military organization as well as local village ritual and an impressive complex of larger temples and Brahmanic settlements. The political economy (by which I mean here the institution of kingship, the distribution of authority, and the nature and structure of resource allocation) was based on a logic of redistribution that penetrated far and wide.

The gift of land without onerous burdens of taxation, the occasional participation in wars in which honour and booty could be won, and the organization of land and military rights in relations of ritual clientage to chiefly and kingly patrons resulted not only in a political system of great fluidity and dynamism, but one in which individuals could vie for relative distinction in a social system where honour was intimately tied up with rank through interpenetrating forms of political and ritual action. The valued constituents of sovereign authority were differentially and partially shared through the redistributive mechanisms of the gift. Service was offered as a way of entering this redistributive system. Kinship (a relatively open and inflected system) became the social base and expression of social and political relations. Honour—in particular the emblems and privileges that were given with each grant (itself a privilege), but also the honours in temples that were procured through worship and were ordered in

relation to local and royal prerogatives—was both the mediation and the mechanism by and through which relations were established.

Thus I argue that the royal gift was basic to statecraft in all the kingdoms of the old order in southern India. All gifts were not the same; but they all shared one thing in common: they were given by the king. The substance of the gift (the land rights, titles, emblems, honours, and privileges of service, usufruct, and command) was the partial sovereign substance of the king. Participation in the king's sovereignty was not, however, unranked, for the differential nature and contingent character of all these entitlements provided the basis for the creation of a political hierarchy. Ultimately, entitlements by their very nature constituted hierarchy through a logic of variable proximity to the king, to sovereignty itself. What Geertz has written about Bali is true of the old order in south India: 'The whole of the *negara* (court life, the traditions that organized it, the extractions that supported it, the privileges that accompanied it) was essentially directed toward defining what power was; and what power was what kings were' (Geertz 1980: 124).

My sense of the meaning of royal gifts was initially based not only on a reading of land records, which, though they gave histories of grants, revealed a thick infrastructure of gifting and suggested that land rights were necessarily conjoined with other rights to privilege, service, and honour, were themselves insufficiently explicit about the ideological content of the system to permit a full or satisfactory interpretation. Rather, I developed an understanding of kingly beneficence from textual sources that depicted the centrality of gifts and their various forms. Using eighteenth-century texts (genealogies, chronicles, ballads) as cultural discourses, I found persistent motifs, events, narrative forms, tropes, and images, and I read the parts they played in the poetics of power. I used this textualized discourse not only, as at first I thought was all I could do, to get a sense of how these Indians conceived their own past, but also to demarcate the key element of my subsequent inquiry, to create a historiographical frame for understanding key structures, events, and their relations. I found that my textualized readings were indeed realized in historical processes. Thus I was able to identify and focus on the core conceptions of sovereignty; the interpenetrating transactions in gifts, service, and kinship; the structure and form of political hegemony. I was able to understand

what had previously been obscured in the colonial writing on the little kings, or *poligars* (*palaiyakkarar*): that the adoption of Hindu forms of kingship by what were said to be low caste (later often defined as criminal castes under British rule) chiefs was not just an ideological ruse but, rather, was reflected in the entire structure of the political system; that rights to landholding were political rights and reflected the structure of the little kingdom at the same time that they revealed the pervasive importance of royal honour; and that the states were not absolute failures because of their lack of emphasis on the bureaucratic demarcation of land rights and the collection of revenue, but successful, vital, and, to the British, highly threatening political systems because of the interplay of rights and privileges of land, service, kinship, honour, and local resources.

The Cultural Poetics of Power

But if kingship—and more generally the ‘political’—was so important, how did it affect social relations in the little kingdom? Only after returning to Pudukkottai to do extensive fieldwork in 1981–2 was I able to find that the forms of clan and caste structures that the British had seen as organic growths from the Indian soil had in fact been vitally transformed by the political histories of local-level chiefs. First, through inquiries conducted in the field, I determined that the political hierarchy was also, with certain crucial exceptions, a social hierarchy. As I mentioned above, the Jagirdars were collateral chiefs, the Cervaikarars affinally connected warriors, the Kurikarars mostly Kallars but from sub-castes other than the royal sub-caste, and so on down the line. The Kallars themselves were, as Dumont also found for the Pramalai Kallar, territorially segmented, but in Pudukkottai the royal sub-caste occupied a uniquely important position, dominating all the other segments, or sub-castes. The internal organization of the royal sub-caste, markedly different from all other sub-castes, itself reflected a systematic if sometimes paradoxical inflection by political forces. And the settlement of Kallar chiefs, both great and small, throughout areas of non-Kallar settlement, as well as in the area inhabited by a large and often unruly Kallar sub-caste, effected both the ideological and instrumental dominance of royalty. These Kallars often had royal retainers under them, privileged rights to local lands,

and the right to receive first honours on behalf of the Pudukkottai Raja in all village and locality temples and festivals. The hierarchical force of royalty was expressed in many ways, not least through the comments of one of my principal informants, the titular head of the royal clan or *kuppam*. 'When we assumed our royal status (*antastu*)', this man told me, 'we became, as it were, a royal family. Hence, we, the five top lineages of the clan, began to have affinal relations only with royal families. So we became more elevated and dignified than the other groups and other clans. While the influence and glory of the Raja was high, the influence of those of us living in our group also went up accordingly. Others who do not have marriage ties with the five chiefs lineages also reside here but we classify them at a lower level.' All members of the royal sub-caste were loosely called *rajapantu*, meaning that they had a connection with the Raja. While this term was used to designate all members of the sub-caste in an unmarked sense, within the sub-caste itself there were multiple distinctions of rank, all of them, as it turned out, having to do with proximity to the king. In one particularly lucid discussion, my informant explained to me the logic of hierarchy in Pudukkottai.

Why are we [meaning royal Kallars] superior? [He asked this rhetorically.] Because we maintain control and order (*kattupatu*) in our community. We do not allow widow remarriage and we abide by the moral codes of our society strictly. Other Kallars may say that all Kallars are the same. It is popularly assumed that all Kallars are thieves. But we are not thieves. How can the ruling Kallars steal from others? Our Kallars are pillars of the community, chiefs, village leaders, politicians, and nobles. We have to maintain law and order. How can we go off thieving? We decided that we should lead a life of order and restriction. Others are not like us. We live for honour and status. Our Kallars base our lives on the temple and on marriage relations. Only if the temple and the lineage are correct can we seek an alliance. Our honour is displayed in the palace and in temples. When honour is measured, in the same way the number of carats is measured in gold, will we like less dignified groups taking seats on a par with us? No, they are not fit to sit with us.

The pre-eminence of the royal sub-caste is thus explained not only through reference to the fact that the king hailed from this sub-caste, but by noting that this sub-caste has the most rigidly defined and maintained code of conduct of all sub-castes. These Kallars have the

most order, and they enforced order through the set of restrictions which are implied by the term *kattupatu*. *Kattupatu*, which can be taken to mean code for conduct and discipline, literally means something more like restriction, or even constriction, deriving from the root *kattu*, meaning tied or knotted. The code for conduct includes rigidly defined kinship rules, some of which, like the Brahmanic prohibition of widow remarriage, mark the royal Kallars off from all other Kallars and suggest a kind of Sanskritization. Others involve working one's way through the myriad gradations of upper Kallar society by trading political, social, and cultural capital back and forth, often through affinal transactions. *Kattupatu* is a term that is used frequently by all Kallar sub-castes and indeed all Pudukkottai castes, though only among Kallars, and specifically within the royal sub-caste of Kallars, does it have the particular kind of inflection just described. For all these groups, though again most importantly for the royal sub-caste, *kattupatu* does not mean simply a code for conduct, but a set of authoritative procedures which renders this code enforceable within the community.

My informant's statements, and the general ideological orientation they reflect, reveal the continuation of concerns about the past reputation of Kallars as thieves, bandits, outlaws. The ethnographic discourse here shares much in common with the eighteenth-century family histories that I mentioned earlier. In these texts, as in the statements of Kallar informants, the acknowledged past becomes totally transformed by the attainment of kingship. Again, there is an implicit opposition between the representation of the activities of thieves and the activities of kings. In this case, the royal duty of protecting and subduing disorder is combined with an ideology of order and restriction which organizes and becomes the sub-text of the social relations of the sub-caste.

The very word Kallar means thief in Tamil, and no one, at least none of my informants, disputes the fact that at certain places and times particular groups of Kallars engaged in predatory activity. In fact they constantly bring it up with a certain kind of relish, suggesting only partial embarrassment about their past. And as I and others have written elsewhere, this in itself is not necessarily a problem, since predation was often the principal means used to accumulate wealth by kings who were not so concerned about a regularized tax base as

the British became when they began in the early nineteenth century to gain most of their profit from land revenue. In Pudukkottai, Kallars attained their position of royal authority in the first place by providing protection to local communities and institutions, and this is amply documented in inscriptions recording protection because of their capacity to control, and to a very large extent monopolize, the means of violence, and there is much in Indian tradition to suggest that the opposition of bandit and king is a complementary opposition. But it is, culturally speaking, an opposition: the violence of the bandit is illegitimate, and it represents and causes the disorder that the legitimate violence of the king must control. Kings are not only legitimate, they define the realm of the legitimate. And the way in which the royal sub-caste organizes its social relations makes it impossible that they could be thieves, or affected in any way by this general reputation. The royal sub-caste is headed by a king, and it provides almost all the royal nobles of the kingdom. The fundamental duty of these members of the elite is to subdue disorder, destroy lawlessness, and enforce law and order, both within the kingdom at large, and within the sub-caste itself. And of course, as kings, by virtue of defining what is orderly, they define disorder too.

But this is true in more than just the obvious, or for that matter the Foucaultian, sense, as I discovered when doing fieldwork with other caste groups. For most castes, there is a steady decrease of order as one goes down the caste hierarchy, in the sense defined by my Kallar informants and assimilated with only minimal dissent by many non-Kallar informants. Maravars, for example, who in all fundamental respects were like Kallars except for the crucial fact that they were not kings, had found it impossible to organize their social relations in the larger territorial units, the *natus*, that Kallars had, and the Maravars lamented this loudly and frequently. Indeed, the Maravars themselves attributed this disorder not just to the broader decline and fall of the world in general, but more particularly to their loss of political control. For other groups, there was not only a noticeable decline in order, and a laxness in defining and maintaining the *kattupatu*, but also a decline in the autonomy to define what order was. Untouchable groups, for example, took the locality, and sometimes the lineage, names of their dominant caste patrons. Whereas other groups had traditional rights called *kaniyatci* to land, honour, etc., untouchables told me that for them *kaniyatci* only meant the right to serve their patrons.

The fundamental structures of their social relations were inscribed by the hegemony of the dominant classes. Notions of honour, order, royalty, and command have been operationalized in the practices that produce and reproduce hierarchy. These practices (embedded as they are in cultural forms and historical processes) are themselves based on structures of power as well as on the hegemonic nature of cultural constructions of power.

If it be argued that my interpretation, though perhaps true for marginal regions like Pudukkottai, can hardly apply generally to south India, let alone to the subcontinent as a whole, I reply that it is precisely the marginality of Pudukkottai that makes it possible to detect the forces that were at work elsewhere. Because Pudukkottai was not brought under patrimonial control (neither that of the Islamic rulers in the south nor later that of the British), caste was never set completely loose from kingship. Many current theories of caste, particularly those emphasizing Brahmanic obsessions concerning purity and impurity, but also those aspects of ethnosociological theory that stress the proper and improper mixing of substances, are in large parts artificats of colonialism, referring to a situation in which the position of the king and the historical dynamic of royal power has been displaced, and sometimes destroyed. However much Dumont's theory is predicated on an a priori separation of what he describes as the domains of religion and politics, with the former encompassing the latter, he was also almost certainly influenced by an ethnographic reality in which kingship played only a very small, residual role. As for early ethnosociological proposals about caste, Inden has himself recently noted that his early work is largely derived from texts which were generated only after the demise of kingship as a powerful cultural institution (Inden 1986). The texts, he now says, reflected new traditions which attempted to deal with the problem of regulating caste interaction in an environment in which there was no longer a king.

The Politics of Hierarchy

Politics, as we define it here, has both to do with the processes by which authority is constituted at each level of representation and with the linkages of the constituent groups in society to the king (usually through the authoritative figures who represent their social

groups). Politics has a territorial dimension, but is not exhausted by territorial forms. In the royal sub-caste of Kallars in Pudukkottai, the intervention of the king changed and reconstructed (as well as decomposed) the internal order of the system, affecting both social and territorial forms. Even in other sub-castes, less directly influenced by kingship, social organization was only understandable within a framework which is fundamentally political, realized over time (i.e. in history).

It is my argument here that structures of power play a central role in the social organization of caste and kinship, that politics is fundamental to the process of hierarchization and the formation of units of identity. Dumont has great difficulty with the notion that kinship can be politicized. When he does see hierarchical tendencies develop in the domain of kinship, he blames them on the ideology of caste, which has to do not with politics but with purity and pollution. Dumont's elevation of alliance as the fundamental principle of south Indian kinship is in large part because alliance mitigates the asymmetrical effects of marriage relations through the generalized exchange of marriage partners within the endogamous group. Hierarchy creeps to the borders of the endogamous group, but only enters in the sense that it can bring about the creation of new endogamous subdivisions. Nonetheless, even though Dumont (1957, 1986) suggests the powerful role of political dominance in creating alliances and particular marriage patterns, he explains any such endogamous subdivisions by saying that they arise through bastardy or the differential status of wives in a polygynous marriage. Dumont maintains that new endogamous groups develop within larger endogamous groups only because of the lower status attached to marriages with women from outside the proper alliance group.

Politics not only occupies a subordinate position in Dumont's general theory, but is eclipsed on the one side by the pre-eminence of kinship, invaded by social bastardy and caste hierarchy, and on the other by caste, which elevates the Brahman and attendant principles of purity and pollution, above the king. Caste, and the hierarchical principle it entails, is fundamental because it is religious, and in Indian social thought, according to Dumont, the religious encompasses the social, the economic, and the political.

Dumont therefore sees caste authority and political authority as

fundamentally different. He writes that 'the notion of caste and of a superior caste exhausts all available transcendence. Properly speaking, a people's headman can only be someone of another caste. If the headman is one of their own, then to some degree they are all headmen' (Dumont 1986: 161). This is true in Pudukkottai in that headmen are at one level simply *primus inter pares* in their social group. However, by virtue of their connection to the king, they do also 'transcend' their own community. The king is himself simply a Kallar, and not the highest Kallar by his marriage or lineage. But by virtue of his connections to the entire kingdom—not caste transcendence—he is also the transcendent overlord.

Hierarchy in Pudukkottai concerns transcendence in the context of kingship, where the king is both a member of a segmentary lineage system and the overlord of the entire kingdom. What would seem contradictory to Dumont is the paradox upon which the entire caste system rests. Kinship is inflected, at its core, by politics; and politics is nothing more than the curious paradox of a king who transcends all, even as he is one of his own metonyms. In the social and political world of the little kingdom, this meant that the king was an overlord, but one who was nonetheless always embroiled in the strategic concerns of kinship, status hierarchy, protection, and warfare, and in the maximization of his own honour and sovereign authority within the little kingdom and in a wider world of other kingdoms and greater overlords.

Part of Dumont's resistance to acknowledging the political inflection of caste and kinship may result from the political marginality of the Pramalai Kallars, a marginality rendering them far more similar to the unruly Vicenki Nattu Kallars who lived in the northwestern part of Pudukkottai state than to the royal sub-caste. With both the Pramalai Kallars and the Vicenki Nattu Kallars, the lack of well-developed affinal boundaries corresponding to discrete territorial units, as well as of a distinct sense of the hierarchy of groups, can perhaps be explained by their incomplete incorporation within (and therefore inflection by) the political system of a little kingdom. Everywhere in Tamil Nadu, the Kallars had highly developed notions of territory, but their sub-caste organization achieved its particular level of territorial segmentation and hierarchical articulation in Pudukkottai alone. And only within the royal sub-caste of Pudukkottai did Kallars develop the pronounced

and complex forms of territorial bounding and hierarchical marking that they did, and which I describe in great detail elsewhere (1987). Kingship does make a difference.

Some of Dumont's theoretical problems stem from the fact that he does not pursue an interest in the ethnohistorical reconstruction of the Pramalai Kallars. He is aware of the modern decline of headmanship, and that it no longer expresses itself as fully as it might once have done in the social logic of Pramalai organization. Characteristically acute, he senses a correlation with recent political change: 'If authority rests on external sanction, it is to be expected that it cannot maintain itself without formal government recognition' (Dumont 1986: 159). Unfortunately, he does not consider the possibility that colonialism, and the attendant breakdown of the old regime, have much to do with the development of the separation of religion and politics which he has identified and reified into a timeless Indian social theory. A combination of theoretical programme, ethnographic 'accident', and historical disinterest have conspired to render Dumont's understanding of the Kallars, however powerful, limited in fundamental ways.

Here and elsewhere I have argued that the social relations that made up Indian society, far from being 'essentialist' structures predicated on the transcendence of a set of religious principles, were permeated by 'political' inflections, meanings, and imperatives. Caste, as it is still portrayed in much current anthropological literature, is a colonial construction, reminiscent only in some ways of the social forms that preceded colonial intervention. The structural relations that made up the 'caste system' in Pudukkottai thus reflect—albeit with the distortions of ethnohistorical time—the ideological proposals of my informants. These ideological statements consistently referred to the historical means by and through which meaning was constructed and maintained. Caste, if ever it had an original form, was inscribed from the 'beginning' by the relations and conceits of power. And in medieval and early modern south India, it is clear that Geertz was indeed right: power was what kings were.

Ethnohistory and Ethnosociology

'We need history, but not the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it.'—Nietzsche, *Of the Use and Abuse of History*

When I first began to use the term ethnohistory to describe the particular blend of history and anthropology that I sought to practise in my study of India, I thought that 'ethno' should do the same thing to history that it seemed to be doing to sociology. Of course the place was Chicago, the time the mid-1970s, and the word was culture. But even then, and despite the fact that in my work I sought to construct my sense of what it meant to do history in light of 'indigenous' historical texts, ethnohistory struggled against itself. Not only did ethnohistorians seem constantly to pose the question about epistemological mediation that began only rather later to problematize the original assumptions of ethnosociology (questions such as, how does an outsider attain access to or re-present a culturally specific form of knowledge?), but culture as a domain was much more difficult to lock up (or off) as a separate area of inquiry. The injunction, 'Always historicize!', seemed always already there. But then as now, it was not always clear what the injunction meant (see Jameson 1981).

Originally, ethnohistory meant the reconstruction of the history of an area and people who had no written history. As such, it was used to denote in particular the field of studies concerning the past of American Indians, and secondarily of other so-called primitive or pre-literate societies. But, as many have since demonstrated, ethnohistory cannot be restricted to the unwritten or oral sources for history in most parts of the world where texts and written sources exist, even if they do not seem to penetrate some sectors of society. In India, as in many other places, there are no pure oral traditions: texts have provided the basis for tradition as often as the other way round. Indeed, both texts and traditions relate not only to each other, but also to historical processes of production and social forms of contextualization, interpretation, and certification. Ethnohistory in India is clearly not about the history of primitive or preliterate people.

As suggested above, ethnohistory is also not simply a gloss for a cultural analysis of historical sensibilities in India, whether embodied in texts or traditions. However, part of the task of ethnohistory is to contest the dominant voice of history, which in India has always been a Western voice. This voice has always disparaged India, insisting that the relative absence of chronological political narrative and the unsettling presence of myth and fancy are indicative of an under-developed sense of history. Ethnohistory can therefore assist in the

project of recuperating a multiplicity of historical voices, revealing for India an active, vital, and integral historiographical industry. I have also argued that ethnohistory can help determine a culturally specific set of relevancies, moments, and narrative forms to expand and alter the sense of how to think about India's past. But this past is never contained solely within the texts or traditions that would be used for this task. If ethnohistory is used to situate history, it is always itself seen as situated in history (see also Denning 1980: 38).

Thus, the difficulties in anthropologizing history are not simply removed by the inverse call to historicize anthropology, for we never seem to reach explicit agreement about what history actually means. But if an investigation into the culture of history has both the strengths and the weaknesses of ethnosociology, an exploration of what is involved in the history of culture can assist in making a creative critique of culture theory, whether in ethnosociology or elsewhere. Not only has ethnosociology been insufficiently clear about the epistemological privilege it assumes in its claim to re-present indigenous forms of knowledge, it has excluded a wide range of historical questions, as also any consideration of the relations of knowledge and power beyond a restricted form of cultural analysis.

This is not the place, however, to summarize the arguments of Gramsci, Williams, Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Foucault, and other theorists who have helped specify and problematize the historicity of culture. It must suffice here to note that when culture is situated in history rather than opposed to it, the concept of culture inevitably unravels. I began by using culture as a method and conceit to privilege the discursive claims of my Kallar informants in relation to Dumont's proposals about the nature of hierarchy in India. That is to say, I began by participating in the ethnosociological claim that if you investigate native terms and meanings you will find that hierarchy is about x and not about y. However, the cultural statements of my informants subverted the autonomy of a presumed cultural domain, and in particular the opposition between the political/historical and the cultural/religious. At the same time, the injunction to historicize, vague though it sometimes seemed, enticed me to enter the web of power, knowledge, and history that constituted both the world of reference as well as the necessary conditions for contemporary cultural discourse. Culture, thus, was a conceit that deconstructed itself

through its own historical reference, for culture distilled and displayed (and often displaced) the historical legacy of its own hegemonic ascendance.

The necessarily ambivalent position of history within any ethno-historical project provides critical access to much of the current theoretical debate about culture. But ethnohistory should not simply disparage ethnosociology. For, in calling attention to the hegemony of Western social science, ethnosociology may both set some of the conditions for this kind of critique in Indian studies, and yet have the last laugh. The theoretical concerns about culture articulated here are as Western in their dominant figures and intellectual histories as the more positivist social science from which we tried to free ourselves in previous decades. However, if 'history' teaches us anything at all, it should at least help us dispose of the idea that culture can exist outside of history, however much this history—and I suspect any history—is always mediated through a multiplicity of cultural forms.

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3

Western 'Orientalists' and the Colonial Perception of Caste*

SUSAN BAYLY

Introduction

This chapter examines the understandings of caste propounded by Western orientalist from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century. It is important to explore these because so-called Western 'constructions' of caste had a considerable effect on Indian life, especially where such views were shaped by contributions from Indians themselves. Some at least of these ideas became embodied in the practices of government both during and after colonial rule, as well as being embraced, disputed, and reflected on by Indian politicians, literati, and social reformers.

Often, though not invariably, so-called orientalist saw Hindus as the prisoners of an inflexibly hierarchical and Brahman-centred value system. Their insistence on this point played a significant part in the making of a more caste-conscious social order. Yet this could happen only in the context of broader political and social changes which

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were in progress well before the onset of colonial rule, as was seen in the preceding chapters. Furthermore, the continuing movement towards the castelike ways of life to be described in the book's final chapters could not have occurred in so many areas without the active participation of Indians.

So while much of the subcontinent did become more pervasively caste-conscious under British rule, this is not to say that caste was in any simplistic sense a creation of colonial scholar-officials, or a misperception on the part of fantasizing Western commentators. Nor is it to say that the 'modernization' of India would somehow have taken a casteless or caste-denying form under a different kind of political order. It would therefore be wrong either to concentrate exclusively on 'orientalism' in exploring the meaning of caste under colonialism, or to deal with it from a strictly material or political perspective. Thus, before looking in Chapter 5 at the social and economic changes which helped to spread the norms of caste in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chapters 3 and 4 will attempt to create a more nuanced intellectual history of both British and Indian conceptions of caste. The British side of this story is the focus of this chapter, with Indian theories and debates being explored in Chapter 4.

The Limited Power of Caste Reportage

As of the 1820s, British officials were deeply embroiled in the complex social and ideological changes which had initially exalted the warrior's caste codes, and had then given increasing prominence to those of the 'dharmic' Brahman and merchants. As a trading firm which had only just transformed itself into a fragile military despotism, the English East India Company was struggling to consolidate its new territorial possessions and to identify 'collaborators' in locales where even experienced officials were hard pressed to distinguish friend from foe. In these volatile circumstances, the acquisition of detailed social knowledge had become essential to the Company's operations. As in other parts of the Empire, both Britons and those whom they were trying to rule found advantage in feeding the still insecure colonial state with such data as could be used to tax and police its subjects.

For some modern historians, this quest for information was a 'hegemonic' exercise enabling Britons to divide and enfeeble the peoples of

the subcontinent by subjecting them to a demeaning and destructive process of 'essentialization'. Caste was certainly much referred to in the reportage which shaped both scholarship and official policy in the nineteenth century, that is, in the publications of jurists, missionaries, revenue surveyors, military recruiters, and innumerable other observers of Indian life. Indeed, the increasingly powerful and intrusive colonial regime that came into being after the 1857 Mutiny-Rebellion found more and more reasons to count and classify the subcontinent's peoples, and to call on Indians to report themselves as members of specific social, economic, and occupational categories, each supposedly possessing its own 'essences' and qualities. Particular importance has been attached to the operations of the all-India decennial Census, which was launched in 1871; in its voluminous reports and statistical tables, Indians were counted, ranked, and classified by caste, 'tribe', and ethnoreligious 'community'. By the early twentieth century, the massive bureaucratic machinery of the Raj had generated an enormous output of further documentation in which jati and varna were used as basic units of identification.

Two key themes have been identified in this vast array of regional ethnographic surveys, population censuses, and other official and quasi-official writing. The first of these is an insistence on the supposedly ineradicable sense of community dividing Hindus from Muslims and other non-Hindus; the second is a view of Indians (apart from so-called tribals and followers of minority faiths) as slaves to rigid, Brahman-centred caste values. This is what Ronald Inden has called the 'imagined India' of false and dehumanizing orientalist stereotypes. Historians of the so-called Subaltern school have seen these misperceptions and wilful distortions as having passed unchallenged from self-serving colonial reportage into the pronouncements of India's post-Independence ruling class.

Yet the writings of nineteenth-century travellers, missionaries, and scholar-officials were far too diverse and contradictory to be portrayed in such one-dimensional terms, regardless of period, and without allowing for important variations in approach and interpretation. The colonial state was certainly hungry for statistical and ethnographic data. And, like the many Christian missionaries who engaged in orientalist reportage, colonial officers regularly used phrasing which offends the modern ear:

. . . the Hindoo is mild and timid, rather disposed to melancholy, and effeminate pleasures.

The life of the Rajput in British districts is not calculated to develop the manly virtues . . . they have lost the taste for manly exercises which harden the muscles and develop the physique.

The Arora is the trader 'par excellence' (of southwestern Punjab) . . . (They) are of inferior physique . . . 'a cowardly secretive, acquisitive race . . . possessed of few manly qualities . . .'

All Bowries [also known to colonial ethnographers as Badhiks or Bhudduks, a 'vagrant' or 'gypsy' caste] have been from ages past and are still by profession inveterate and irreclaimable robbers.

Such pronouncements have been seen as evidence of an orientalist 'project' to deny the existence of civil society in India. By representing the subcontinent as a domain of slavish allegiances, orientalist purportedly fed officialdom with the idea that it was 'scientific' to treat Indians as unvirile, irrational, and socially atomized, thus unfit to govern themselves.* Yet these writings contained ambiguities and contradictions. The more sophisticated conveyed real uncertainty about whether ties of caste and ethnoreligious community were indeed paramount for all Indians. Among those who did emphasize its power, some at least saw caste as relatively modern in origin rather than an eternal essence of Indian culture. There was even debate about whether caste was indeed corrupting and destabilizing, or an essentially benign and moral system which could be used for desirable ends.

So how did the most influential Western commentators perceive the ideologies of caste, and how much significance did they attach to their manifestations in Indian life? There are two points to bear in mind here. First, the importance which these analysts ascribed to caste cannot be explored in isolation, or in an exclusively Indian or colonial framework. On the contrary, their writings about caste need to be considered against the background of wider intellectual debates

*The term orientalism is most widely associated with the work of Edward Said, who identified a wide range of past and contemporary Western thinkers with attitudes justifying or echoing colonial intellectual practices, especially those representing non-white peoples as irrational, violent, childlike, morally undeveloped, 'effeminated' and dangerously inclined towards extreme forms of belief and behaviour.

involving attempts by Western thinkers to address the pressing social and political questions of their time. And secondly, within India itself, the analysis of caste must be related to debates about other aspects of south Asian polity and social order, some of which, notably race and religion, came to acquire equal or greater prominence in so-called orientalist discourse.

It is true that, from the early nineteenth century, scholar-officials were turning increasingly to literate Brahmans and to the Brahmanized scribal and commercial populations who were coming into prominence across India. These groups were particularly sought after as learned informants and as providers of the sastric texts which the Company's officers were coming to treat as authoritative sources on 'native' law and custom. Some of these were the same superior literate specialists described [earlier; in Susan Bayly's book]. Such people's concern to retain the preferment they had achieved under previous regimes gave many of them an incentive to tell the colonial state that India was a land of age-old Brahmanical values, and that its inhabitants could be most effectively controlled by feeding their supposed reverence for hierarchical jati and varna principles.

In some cases it clearly suited both the British authorities and their informants to disseminate a picture of Indian life which disregarded its instances of comparative openness and intellectual dynamism, and emphasized instead those conventions of caste and 'community' which made it appear static and rigidly Brahman-centred. David Washbrook has proposed this for the early colonial south, arguing that in the early nineteenth century Tamilnad's newly vulnerable landed elites found advantage in playing up claims of superior varna and jati origins in their dealings with the colonial judiciary. Both colonial judges and revenue officials had apparently come to see the use of prestigious Brahman and Vellala caste titles as evidence of authentically lordly origins, even though they were also aware that families of comparatively humble birth had acquired rights and property under the region's recently conquered warrior dynasts.

These Madras officials did not see such instances of social mobility as signs of healthy Western-style individualism. On the contrary, they were worried about stability in what they saw as a dangerously volatile region, and believed that the country should be governed in alliance with its 'natural aristocracy'. Thus these superior Tamil landowners

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quickly found that British judges were more likely to abrogate their privileged revenue rights if these were represented as having been acquired in the recent past by known historic acts of purchase or endowment. It appears then that they learned to tell the courts that they should be allowed to keep their holdings simply because they were Brahmans or ancient Vellala lords of the land. In other words, these were Indians who probably had a perfectly clear idea about where their landholding rights had come from. Yet, in flat contradiction of the colonial state's pronouncements about the superiority of its individualistic legal and political principles, they learned at this time that it paid to behave like ahistorical 'orientals' who believed in age-old corporate statuses and divinely mandated tradition, rather than individualistic principles of achievement and personal gain.

For other regions too it has been argued that India came to look like a traditional caste society because the British perceived and made it so. Put in these stark terms, this idea of caste as a colonial 'invention' is unpersuasive. The Tamil *mirasidar* landlords referred to above would certainly have wished the wider world to see them as Vellalas or Brahmans, whatever the Madras judges did or thought; British colonial perceptions merely added a further dimension to these concerns. Elsewhere too, jati and varna norms had certainly become increasingly pervasive in earlier centuries even if they were not universally subscribed to at the time of the colonial conquest. Furthermore, this view oversimplifies 'colonial' thinking, particularly regarding Brahmans. Even in the later nineteenth century, when the colonial state's strategies of information-gathering became more specialized and elaborate, supposedly reflecting standards of exactitude unknown to non-Europeans, British writers were not interested in caste to the exclusion of other features of Indian life. Most were uncertain about how to obtain and interpret the knowledge they sought, and did not see their findings as proof that the whole of India subscribed to a single ideology of hierarchical caste values.

Many nineteenth-century orientalists saw both priestly and secular Brahmans as an important but also pernicious force in the society, and were far from credulous about the reliability of the *pandits* and other literate specialists who informed them. And, far from defining all of Hindu India as a Brahman-revering caste society, Western

writers regularly noted the prominence of anti-Brahmanical monk-renouncers in the areas they observed, as well as the conspicuousness of distinctly un-Brahmanized peoples and ways of life in many regions. Furthermore, many officials commented on the conflicting views expressed by their various would-be informants, recognizing particularly that Hindu and Muslim notables were often bitterly at odds in their attempts to represent regional ethnographic facts and 'traditions' to their new colonial patrons.

In reality then, British rule generated a remarkable quantity of statistical and analytical documentation in which references to caste featured very prominently, but did not create an all-powerful 'colonial' consensus about this or any other aspect of the society. Anyone moving from revenue records to judicial codes, local censuses, and the descriptive writings of soldiers, missionaries, and other quasi-official observers could meet the same people being represented and 'essentialized' in all sorts of guises, depending on what the commentators in a given region understood by such terms as caste, tribe, race, sect, nationality, religious community, and occupation, or by the multitude of vernacular terms that were used as their rough equivalents.

This diversity remained in evidence even after mid-century when the comparatively uncoordinated efforts of earlier regional data-gatherers began to be supplanted by the launching of a whole host of mammoth all-India data surveys. These include the first series of Indian district *Gazetteers* (1869), the decennial all-India Census (from 1871), the provincial statistical reports (e.g. the twenty-volume *Statistical Account of Bengal*, 1875–7), the encyclopaedic *Tribes and Castes* surveys (from 1891), and all the other exercises in centralized enumeration and reportage which became the hallmarks of the Victorian Raj. For all their flaws and 'orientalist' bias, these works are worth taking seriously, not least because so many Indians found it useful to adapt their terms and concepts for their own purposes. This was particularly so from the later nineteenth century, when complex changes in the so-called public culture of the Raj led many politically active men to try to extend their regional prestige and influence by founding the 'modernizing' voluntary organizations which came to be known as caste associations and caste reform movements.

The Diversity of Orientalism and the Complexity of the 'Other'

The pronouncement of sweeping generalities about other people's 'essences' was not an invention of white men, or of the colonial state. For many centuries before the British conquest, Indians had been meeting outsiders who saw them as alien and exotic. In the eleventh century AD, the Arab traveller al-Biruni described Indian society in language which in some senses prefigured the writings of the 'essentializing' Victorian race theorists. Stressing India's 'exclusive attitudes' and 'laws of purity', al-Biruni declared, 'The Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid.'

In later centuries Muslim writers still knew India as a land of varnas and jatis: 'Binavali is the son of Hiranman, a Kayastha. The Kayasthas are a tribe of the fourth case [*sic*] which Brahman has created . . .' Mughal commentators, too, made much of the moral and physical essences which supposedly distinguished different Indian populations, disparaging the 'wild', black, dangerous Bhils and 'predatory' Kolis, and expressing qualified approval for others, as in the *Ain-i-Akbari*'s account of the Gujarat pastoralists whom the Mughals knew as Ahirs: 'Cunning but hospitable, they will eat the food of the people of every caste, and are a handsome race.' It was the Mughals who developed the technique of grading Indians by skin colour so that officials could record standardized descriptions of criminals, rebels, and other trouble-makers. This system, which classifies people as being of fair, 'wheaten' (medium), or dark complexion, passed straight into colonial police practice; it was retained even after the adoption of finger-printing, and remained in use well into the post-Independence period.

Thus the British were certainly not India's first data-hungry rulers. Much that was done in the nineteenth century to classify and aggregate Indians for official purposes was in line with the practices of earlier statecraft. In the sixteenth century, the Telugu-speaking migrant warriors who called themselves Nayakas were able to impose heightened forms of centralized tribute-taking on the realms they founded in the southern Tamil country. As commercial networks expanded in these areas, the Nayakas found that relatively tight jati

affinities were developing among the more specialized occupational groups. This kind of cohesion was probably already in existence in certain parts of both north and south India, among many urban artisans, fishermen, ritualists, and specialized pollution-removers such as barbers and washerman. The Nayakas were therefore among the many expansive rulers who treated such groups as collective entities for the purposes of revenue collection. The earliest British revenue surveys and population censuses used techniques and categories which were borrowed directly from these rulers and their successors, as in the case of the *dehazada* surveys which were village-by-village compilations of the size, assets, and revenue liabilities of a given region's ethnic and occupational communities.

These changes in economic and political power gave rise to the phenomenon of so-called caste headmanship, or at least gave greater definition to the guild-like forms of organization and leadership which had apparently been common among traders and artisans in earlier centuries. Among merchants and other specialized populations in these warrior-ruled realms, certain individuals or lineages either had or were acquiring an exalted status as arbiters of craft or commercial standards, and seem to have been distinguished in ritual terms as well. These were the people whom the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Nayaka lords were inclined to honour as chief notables or *talaivans*, vesting them with the authority of so-called caste headmanship in their home locales, and making them liable for the collection of cash revenue dues from the members of their particular community. Their equivalents in north India were the notables known as *chaudhuris* who were given similar duties and honours under the Mughals and their successors. The East India Company ran its coastal enclaves in collaboration with these people. Generations later there were still ethnographers and census enumerators who took the view that castes in general, or at least many non-agrarian castes, were self-regulating corporations which deferred to the authority of caste headmen and councils or *panchayats* of caste 'elders'.

Why and how did Europeans start to use the term caste? The word's origins are usually said to be Iberian. In the sixteenth century the term *casta* (apparently derived from the Latin *castus*, chaste) was used in Portuguese and Spanish to mean species or breed in both botany and animal husbandry; it seems though to correspond to the English word

cast or caste which had the same meaning and apparently predates the British connections with India. *Casta* came to be used in the Iberian New World colonies to refer to Amerindian clans and lineages. Since its botanical and zoological uses involved the concept of pure or true strains and breeds, in the Americas it also came to be applied by bloodline-conscious Iberian settlers to people of mixed white and non-white descent. In India *casta* was used by early European travellers as an ambiguous term for community, blood-line, or birth-group. It appears in sixteenth-century Portuguese sources both as a term for religious denomination, that is, the difference between 'Moor' (Muslim) and Hindu (or 'Gentoo'), as well as what we would now understand as *jati* and *varna*.

By the mid-seventeenth century, Dutch and English writing on India had adopted these usages from the Portuguese, employing them with equal ambiguity and in conjunction with other imprecise terms including race, class, nation, sect, and tribe. In the maritime trading ports, early travellers and officials met forms of social organization which were apparently much influenced by Brahmanical conventions. This probably reflects the fact that the artisans and mobile commercial people with whom the East India Companies were involved in this period were finding ritual and practical advantage in embracing these 'traditional' caste forms. Describing life in the commercial port of Surat in 1689, the English traveller Ovington reports: 'Among the Bannians [*banias*: commercial caste groups] are reckoned 24 castes [*sic*], or Sects, who both refrain from an indiscriminate mixture in Marriages, and from eating together in common.'

This account is couched in virtually the same language that was in use 200 years later in 'essentializing' colonial pronouncements about the 'effete' and 'unmanly' qualities of India's so-called 'non-martial races'. Ovington insists too that people in a caste society are politically unfree, that caste is both a 'despotic' and an emasculating institution and a tool of 'tyrants'. Thus the 'innocent and obsequious' *banias* have a 'Horror of Blood', says Ovington, they are subjects of a 'Despotick Government [which] breaks their Spirits . . .'; this combines with the torrid climate to 'weaken and effeminate their constitutions . . .' His account also stresses the conventions of strict ritual avoidance which he claims to have observed among the Surat *bania* groups, particularly their employment of pollution-removers ('Halalchors'), 'separated from all the rest of the Casts, as a thing Unclean'.

Ovington's remarks obviously prefigure many of the so-called essentializing themes of later 'orientalist' scholarship. Yet they were produced almost a century before Britain's move from trade to dominion in Asia, and in an intellectual and political milieu with little or no resemblance to the England of high Victorian muscular Christianity and imperial cults of manliness. He and the other early Company chroniclers who commented on the supposed 'unmanliness' and political slavishness of Indians were far from being representatives of a 'hegemonic' colonial power, and it is therefore important to place these views and judgements in their contemporary intellectual context. In Ovington's day English social commentators saw 'despotism' as a European evil. In the Protestant political theory of the time, it was the Church of Rome and the absolutist monarchies of Europe which imposed tyrannical despotism on freeborn Christians, deforming their characters and making them 'womanish' and slavish. In the travel writing of this period, current debates about polity, despotism, and the English constitution were regularly transposed to the Indian setting. This certainly provided later memorialists with ideas that were applied to the circumstances of full-scale empire, but in their own time they cannot be seen as tools being fashioned for explicitly colonial purposes.

By the early eighteenth century, the European commercial enclaves were places where local conditions of trade and social organization gave foreign commentators very diverse experiences of caste. In the south, representatives of the European trading companies were struck by what they understood to be a deep and contentious division between castes of the so-called left-hand and right-hand (*idangai* and *valangai*). European traders and officials found themselves being drawn into violent conflicts between bodies of artisans, traders, and affiliated labouring people who had come to group themselves into these paired multi-jati alliances. These confrontations took the form of battles over deceptively trivial matters of ceremonial rank or temple 'honours'. In Madras and other European trading centres, representatives of the European companies reported at length on these conflicts, often compiling extensive listings of the rights and 'honours' which their adjudicators had conferred on particular groups of their contending 'right'- or 'left'-hand clients and litigants.

This left-right ideology was apparently unknown outside the Telugu and Tamil country, and it had virtually disappeared as a focus

for so-called honours disputes by the mid-nineteenth century. It seems to have originated in the fluid commercial milieux of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Nayaka domains, as a response to changing opportunities for both the local specialist groups who dominated the left-hand groupings, and the long-distance migrant traders who called themselves 'people of the right hand'. European trading operations undoubtedly contributed to the flow of assets which the contending parties were fighting over, and which they were able to translate back and forth into gains and losses in the ritual sphere. But while the involvement of British and other Western adjudicators clearly made a significant difference to some of these disputes, Europeans can hardly be said to have invented any of this, or to have used their law-codes and ethnographies to try to perpetuate it as a 'divide and rule' tactic of the Raj.

Caste and the Individual in Company-Era Reportage, 1790–1860

The late eighteenth century saw the production of the first Indian gazetteers in English, these being digests of reportage on topography, economic life, and the physical environment, together with accounts of certain regions' political and social landscape. These volumes were partly modelled on the great encyclopaedic Mughal surveys, especially the *Ain-i-Akbari*. At the same time they were part of the ever-growing British and European drive to subject all known phenomena of the human and natural world to the gaze of the fact-seeking explorer, naturalist, and investigative scientist. The growth of empire was closely linked to these activities, though again it would be wrong to reduce all aspects of this period's pre-Rebellion, map-making, specimen-collecting, and ethnographic writing to an assertion of colonial relationships.

The compilers of the early Anglophone gazetteers certainly did not see all Indians as being equally 'Brahmanized' or castelike in the modern sense. Most used the terms caste, tribe, sect, and nation interchangeably; such usages often signalled no more than that the groups being described possessed some bond of affinity in the writer's eyes, often of a dangerously conspiratorial or 'criminal' nature, and frequently underpinned by ritualistic or occult attachments. Some

of these 'tribes' or 'sects' were clearly thought of by early Western commentators as being part of a ranked Brahmanical order of castes. Others definitely were not, and there is often very little emphasis on rules of food avoidance or other aspects of ritualized purity and pollution concepts in these discussions of caste. It is often unclear in these accounts whether the ties that are held to unite such armed 'predator' peoples as 'Kolis' and 'Bhuddicks' are to be understood as permanent, inherited identities such as we would now associate with jati and varna. Many of the warlike groups which particularly concern these authors were apparently regarded as Pindari-like 'gangs' formed by voluntary self-recruitment, though these were clearly thought to be capable of becoming permanent hereditary attachments over time.

Thus, what these early orientalists saw as caste implied a dangerous capacity for strong and dynamic people from India's 'lawless' regions to form menacing 'combinations' and conspiratorial alliances with one another at will. This is not a picture of passive or 'effeminated' slaves of Brahmanical tradition, even though Brahmanical principles are sometimes thought of as reinforcing such ties and statuses. In Kathiawar, says Walter Hamilton, author of the *East-India Gazetteer* (first published 1815), the 'Castes' (Kallar-like upland arms-bearers from Kathiawar) and 'many other tribes calling themselves Hindoos' have only 'very slender' claims to be considered 'within the Brahmanical pale'; their tenets 'with respect to purity and impurity [are] by no means rigid . . .'

This was the era of the Company's confrontation with the many hinterland realms and peoples whose unsettled ways and complex layered schemes of political authority were seen by its officials as a danger and challenge to the new regime's shaky sovereignty. Not surprisingly then, the key theme of this period's ethnographic writing was order and polity. The picture of 'caste' that emerges in these sources is very different from the accounts of seventeenth-century commercial enclaves like Surat, and makes much more of individual will and conspiratorial 'intrigue' than it does of established orders of rank and precedence.

As was seen, when the power and status of Brahmans were discussed in the early stages of the Company's political expansion, there was a strong emphasis on the lessons to be learned from the allegedly oppressive, unnatural, and corrupting experience of

'Brahman' government in the Maratha country. Evangelical Protestant missionaries took up this theme of Brahman tyranny as a means of attacking Sir William Jones and the other eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century scholar-officials who had ascribed 'purity' and 'sublimity' to ancient Hinduism. The influential four-volume polemic by the Rev. William Ward (publ. 1817–20) characterized Hindu faith as a 'fabric of superstitions' concocted by Brahmans, 'the most complete system of absolute oppression that perhaps ever existed'.

Christian polemics like Ward's were clearly a major if unacknowledged source for later academic theorists, including those modern anthropologists who came to regard the Brahman as arbiter and moral centre of the Hindu social order. Ward actually anticipates Dumont's position on the radical subordination or encompassment of kingly power by Brahmanical authority: the 'Hindoo system', he says, is 'wholly the work of bramhuns [*sic*]' who had 'placed themselves above kings in honour, and laid the whole nation prostrate at their feet'. This vision of immoral Brahman despotism clearly drew on popular English Protestant mythology of a priest-ridden, tyrannized papist Europe awaiting liberation by the triumph of the Reformation spirit. Beneficent British rule, said Ward, had already been inducing some 'degraded' lower-caste Hindus to throw off their 'brahmanical fetters' [*sic*]. Thus, like the debunkers of Maratha 'Brahman government', the arguments of Ward and his fellow early evangelicals focused on so-called Brahmanism as a corruption of free will: 'Like all other attempts to cramp the human intellect, and forcibly to restrain men within bounds which nature scorns to keep, this system [varna] . . . has operated like the Chinese national shoe, it has rendered the whole nation cripples.'

Non-missionary ethnographers in this period echoed some of these themes when they told their readers about armed raiders, predators, and lawless 'tribes' whose ways had become inherently 'thievish' and 'refractory' in the Brahman-ruled domains of the Marathas. In this respect, Walter Hamilton's *Gazetteer* of 1828 is a far cry from the ostensibly confident overviews of a settled and safely domesticated India that emerge from the *Imperial Gazetteers* and other works of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century official scholarship. His approach is 'scientific' and often negative in tone, but unlike the missionaries, Hamilton's work does not characterize caste Hindu in general as submissive, slavish, or 'effeminated'.

Wherever Hamilton goes he finds what he calls castes and sects whose nature he sees as having been collectively depraved by a combination of corrupting political and environmental forces. In the Agra region, he reports that the area's 'peculiar political relations' had engendered a 'backward' state of agriculture, and that the territory was inhabited by 'tribes long noted for their habits of rapine, such as the Mewatties and Buddicks . . .' The feudatories of the Gaekwar's domains are 'predatory and piratical states'; the swamps, jungles, and mountains south of the former Maratha dynastic capital at Baroda had been, until recent times, the haunt of 'many tribes of professed thieves, who preyed on each other and on the civilized districts . . .' In Kathiawar, armed 'gracia' tribute-takers were still enlisting 'banditti of every caste and country'. This, he said, was an area abounding in 'thieves' and 'criminals' from the plains. These people were able to assimilate themselves more or less at will into existing 'predator' populations of 'Grassias, Catties, Coolies, Bheels, and Mewassies'. All these are a danger to order and good government, he says, but '[of] all the plunderers who formerly infested and still, but in less degree, infest Gujerat, the most bloody and untameable are the Collies [Kolis] . . .'

Bengal too, according to Hamilton, was a land where 'dacoits and gang robbers' were still 'prominent'. In Hamilton's view, such propensities were to be ascribed 'to a general absence of the moral principle which applies to the Mahomedans as well as to the Hindoos . . .' But unlike the evangelical Christians whose views became more widespread by mid-century, Hamilton did not portray either Hinduism or Islam as inherently immoral or corrupting. He does not call for mass conversion to Christianity, merely for 'exemplary punishments' and good laws. 'The great mass of Bengalese are certainly not constitutionally brutal or inexorable . . .', he says. Indeed, Hamilton insists, 'The genuine natives of this province never were a martial race, or disposed to a military life, for which, indeed, their want of personal strength and constitution almost incapacitates them . . .'

It is striking then that in this era when the three Presidency armies had become the basis of the Company's new political ascendancy, the distinction between so-called martial and non-martial races was already being made in colonial writing, some fifty years before the concept was built into the formal recruitment policies of the Indian Army. Yet the context here is not so much assertive 'hegemony' as

anxiety about the Company's uneven conquests and fragile political powers. These arguments obviously reflected the practical and strategic concerns of British soldiers and revenue officials. At the same time, they do not indicate that Hamilton and his contemporaries saw India as a unique society where the prevalence of inflexible caste ideas made Indians radically unlike the peoples of the West. On the contrary, his arguments, like those of this period's other influential orientalists, had as their intellectual source the writings of those thinkers, best exemplified by the social theorists of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment, who were concerned to define the conditions under which the human character could attain the highest state of civilized virtue. This was equated with the formation of an ordered and beneficent polity in which rights and liberties were preserved, commerce, property and inheritance secured, and despotic power held at bay.

One of the great themes of these Scottish Enlightenment commentators was the importance of physical environment in the shaping of 'civilized' political institutions. Hamilton and his contemporaries were strongly influenced by this intellectual tradition, as can be seen in their reports on the dangers they perceived in zones of undomesticated Indian hill and jungle terrain, and on the moral and physical contrasts between the people they thought of as freedom-loving martial uplanders and feeble or non-'martial' lowlanders.

By the mid-nineteenth century, these preoccupations with polity and environmental typologies were being subsumed into debates about the moral and political meanings of race. But for all its relevance to the Company's strategic problems, and its obvious prefiguring of later orientalist themes, this remained a very incoherent body of so-called colonial knowledge. The understanding of caste that prevailed in the earlier nineteenth century was far from being the core of anyone's ideas about how to govern or tax the peoples of the subcontinent. Few if any of the early orientalists were concerned to instruct British officials in the running or indeed the fabrication of a colonial 'caste society'. On the contrary, the principal concerns of these writings were largely outside the world of empire, with the same interest in the mapping of human essences being displayed in an enormous range of early- and mid-nineteenth-century works which had little or nothing to do with the governance of colonial subjects.

In particular, the European travel writings of such radical political

commentators as Richard Cobden (1804–65) are full of references to the evils of misgovernment, and the thievish races, martial tribes, and lawless *banditti* who thrive in lax or tyrannical realms. But the so-called races and tribes being anatomized in these accounts are to be found in eastern and southern Europe and the Ottoman lands; few if any connections are made with the strategies of extra-European colonialism. Even in the case of data-collection within the Asian empire itself, until well into the nineteenth century what Europeans thought they understood about India was a product of piecemeal and very disparate forms of knowledge-gathering. The far-reaching linguistic discoveries of William Jones and his contemporaries actually emphasized cultural and historic kinship between the cultures of Europe and south Asia, rather than the superiority of whites over all non-white peoples. In his essays for *Asiatick Researches* and other learned 'orientalist' journals, Jones astounded the learned world with his revelation that India's Sanskrit-derived languages were of the same Aryan or Indo-European root stock as those of Europe.

Jones treated the Vedic texts which he studied and translated as an historic record of the coming of Brahmanical religion to India. His writings about this material gave rise to the powerful and far-reaching myth of an ancient invasion of the subcontinent by 'tribes' of the so-called Aryan race. Jones saw these primordial Aryans as heroes of a great adventure of migration and conquest 'at the earliest dawn of history', bringing with them from their west Asian homeland the teachings of a divine law-giver, Manu. It was the teachings of this 'pure' and 'primeval' religion which introduced the fourfold varna scheme into India, Jones wrote. The mythical Manu was India's primordial legislator; it was he who had 'divided the people into four orders . . . to which he assigned names unquestionably the same in their origin as those applied to the four primary classes of the Hindus . . .' Linguistic kinship thus proved the historic 'racial' kinship of those who came to be identified with this legacy of shared Aryan or Indo-European migration, religion, and political culture, both in Europe and in Asia.

James Forbes, author of *Oriental Memoirs* (1813), built on Jones's claim that a linguistically defined race or nation of Aryans from west Asia had implanted in India the divinely sanctioned principles of the varna scheme. Forbes proposed further subdivisions into eighty-four 'classes or castes', each separated by rigid laws of endogamy, and each

therefore differing from the other in 'features, dress and appearance, as much as if they were of different nations'. Like other early orientalists, Forbes was an environmental determinist who believed that there were profound moral and intellectual differences between those 'castes' or 'tribes' who inhabited bracing temperate climates and those who resided in the subcontinent's hot and 'debilitating' tropical zones. He regarded the inhabitants of rugged Rajasthan as the ultimate specimens of environmentally shaped nobility, 'a noble race of Hindoos, divided into distinct tribes'. The Rajput's homeland evokes a comparison with Switzerland, that favoured milieu of the European Romantics: 'Like that once free and happy country [Switzerland]', Rajasthan 'may be considered, more than any other oriental region, the nurse of liberty and independence.'

Forbes shared his contemporaries' widely held distrust of those 'castes' which he regarded as being of inherently 'gypsy-like', 'degenerate' and 'theivish' character. In this form, Forbes too sees the Indian propensity to form 'conspiratorial' corporate units as a potential danger to legitimate order and civilization. It is significant here that, like many later orientalists, Forbes treats ascetic corporations (sectarian *sanyasi* orders or bodies of 'fakirs') as castes, as in his reference to 'fakeers, or yogees, of the Senassee [*sanyasi*] tribe'. He also saw the Bengal region as a morally enfeebling environment, portraying its inhabitants as a perniciously Brahmanized people imbued with deeply rooted prejudices and attachments to *caste*' (his italics).

For many other Western writers in this period, Malabar, lowland Bengal, and other 'torrid' locales were regions where significant numbers of people did display a strict and 'unhealthy' concern with concepts of ritualized rank and purity. Yet, for all this insistence on the reality and perniciousness of certain forms or manifestations of 'caste', these publications did not stereotype all Indians as slavish Brahman-lovers to whom reason, individualism, and the claims of higher moral allegiances were unknown. In the 1820s and 1830s, at a time when the Company's frail regime was facing declining profits and widespread military challenges on its frontiers, the readers of these same orientalist journals could follow the debates about law, crime, and punishment that were engaging judicial and revenue officers in both India and Ceylon. These included many contributions which were said to be by 'native judges' and other educated Asians. They arose from exercises like the surveys of 'native opinion' undertaken

in 1806 and 1808 in Ceylon and south India to determine whether a system of trial by multi-caste jury should be adopted in the Company's law-courts.

Far from reaching predictably 'orientalist' conclusions on this topic, these jurists did not argue that the 'native' mind was too caste-bound to embrace the individualist and egalitarian principles which they saw as inherent in the British jury system. Indeed, as far as criminal law was concerned, they argued that in this respect Asians were no different from Europeans. Regardless of faith or environment, it was 'elevating' to 'moral and political character' to possess the right to be a juror, and to be tried by a jury of one's own 'countrymen'. An important essay published in 1836 in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* gave prominence to the views of an influential 'native' judicial officer who argued that the members of all 'respectable' castes were indeed capable of exercising individual judgement in legal cases. This capacity for rational and individualistic thought was said to be found even among Shudras ('peasants' of so-called 'clean' castes), whose faculties had supposedly become 'enlightened' since the days of the ancient Brahmanical texts. There is the implication, however, that 'aboriginals' and untouchables were too 'unenlightened' for the mental and moral demands of jury service. What was being expressed here was thus an early formulation of the idea that it was natural for Indians to be ordered by jati and varna, and that this was compatible with good order so long as these caste affinities did not become 'deformed' or excessively Brahman-centred.

Even in the treatment of colonial India's most celebrated display of 'orientalism'—the supposed discovery and suppression of the Thug or *thuggee* cult—the learned publications reach surprising conclusions in regard to caste. In the 1830s the great theme in these highly coloured accounts of fanatical goddess-worshipping strangers who supposedly waylaid travellers and murdered them for profit was that of polity deformed. The writers who claimed expertise on this topic insisted that no such horrors could have flourished in apparently safe and tranquil territories if the Company had not inherited the inadequacies of 'weak native governments' whose corrupt notables had long been in league with the Thugs, protecting the strangler 'gangs' from the laws of the Company and its client states, and sharing the spoils of their 'depredations'.

It is notable that for at least twenty years before the mass trials and

'reformist' legislation of the 1830s, the learned journals had carried reports of occult conspiracies, dangerous criminal 'vagrants', and secret sects of 'hereditary murderers and plunderers' in a variety of Indian regions. What was new in the late 1820s and 1830s was that the famous William Sleeman and his fellow Thug-finders were believed when they assimilated reports of what were probably many different forms of organized and unorganized violence into their vision of a single pan-Indian network of religiously informed 'atrocities'. These accounts certainly made much of the contrast between the rational white man and the fiendishly depraved 'oriental'. In this regard, they therefore prefigure the self-congratulation of those later scholar-officials who had so much to say in the wake of the Mutiny-Rebellion about the ever-present dangers that could threaten British interests in India, and about the role of the eternally vigilant intelligence-gatherer as a civilizer and guardian of empire.

But those colonial officers who believed in the reality of an organized pan-India Thug network were often highly ambivalent about its implications with regard to the meaning and importance of caste. As was noted above, a number of early British commentators were inclined to see India as a domain of menacing secret organizations. These writers used the word caste (as well as such terms as sect, race, and tribe) for almost any kind of network or association to which Indians gave their loyalty, often with the implication that these were potentially sinister and conspiratorial bonds of allegiance. Some officials were therefore inclined to define the Thugs as a fixed social or ethnic unit, that is, as the equivalent of an hereditary caste. This is consistent with the adoption of measures which allowed supposed Thugs to be convicted of criminality solely on the testimony of a so-called approver (a confessed Thug), who deposed that an accused person had either been initiated as a strangler or was the offspring of a Thug. In other words, this was a principle of guilt by virtue of blood, descent, or association, rather than proven individual acts of criminality.

By the end of the nineteenth century, this principle of guilt by collective genetic or social inheritance was extended very widely under the enactments of colonial India's notorious Criminal Tribes and Castes Acts (1871, 1911). Yet even these draconian provisions were mediated by the idea that some people's shared criminal 'essences'

could be expunged through so-called reclamation or rehabilitation. Here, as in other areas of so-called orientalist knowledge, British thinkers and policy-makers were simply inconsistent. Their thinking was particularly unclear about whether being a Thug, or indeed a member of any other caste, 'tribe', or ethnolinguistic unit, was to be understood as a function of inherent essences, or as involving at least some element of individual will and choice. Certainly in other areas of colonial law, Indians came to be treated as individuals to whom British-style rules of evidence and definitions of personal guilt and innocence did indeed apply, regardless of whatever caste or racial 'essence' they might be deemed to possess.

So Indians who subscribed to caste values were not defined by all orientalists as uncivilized, and 'caste society' was definitely not viewed by every British commentator as a domain of irrationality and disorder. Indeed in many accounts of the 'uncovering' of *thuggee*, what most alarms the commentators is the elaborate and ordered way in which the so-called strangler gangs were said to have operated. The really fearful part of this was the implication that Thugs somehow inverted the caste rules and proprieties that were beginning to be held up by Europeans as the hallmarks of virtue and normality in India. Thus, Lt Reynolds, one of a number of Company officers who claimed to have penetrated Thug bands in disguise, reported to the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* that the Thugs who 'infested' the state of Hyderabad were generally of superior birth or arms-bearing background, with Brahmans, Rajputs, Sodhis, Ahirs, and Kolis all mixing together and even recruiting well-born Muslims into this unholy 'free-masonry'. One of their strategies of concealment, he claimed, was the use of aliases—Hindus using Muslim names and vice versa, and members of one caste using the titles of another.

The implication here is that much of the horror of *thuggee* was this alleged perversion of the norms and markers of a proper, civilized order of caste communities. And in these revelations about peace and order unmasked as criminality, and faith perverted into fanaticism, one can certainly see emerging an identifiably 'orientalist' yearning for a safer and more stable India. This was a vision of a new and secure colonial milieu in which Indians behaved predictably and lawfully, according to the known proprieties set down in the white man's ever-growing catalogues of 'orientalist' knowledge.

Caste and the Later Victorian Data-Collectors

By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial authorities were in a very different position from those of their predecessors who had involved themselves in the collection of social and statistical data. From mid-century, the wider intellectual climate affecting the colonial data-collections underwent important changes, most notably through the worldwide elevation of ethnology—the now-discredited science of race—to the status of an authoritative discipline attracting both Western and Asian adherents from almost every branch of the physical and human sciences.

Within India itself, the shock of the 1857 Mutiny-Rebellion drove both military and civil officials to expand and formalize their networks of control and surveillance, and to pursue the quest for social knowledge in ways which differed significantly from the practices of the Company era. Metropolitan developments and pressures were important here too. The abolition of the East India Company in 1858, and the creation of the many new government departments which ran the post-Mutiny Raj, brought closer Parliamentary scrutiny of Indian affairs, and with it a continuing demand for rigour and detail in the reporting of matters with a bearing on both security and finance.

The taste for ethnographic inquiry was also stimulated by new trends in the world of the intellect. In the colonies, as at home, formal schools of social and scientific thought were taking shape in the academic institutions; these were influential in the education of both Europeans and the growing numbers of Indians and other Asians who were being absorbed into the Empire's increasingly vigorous urban intelligentsias. Whether trained in law, medicine, or administration, and even within the military and the missionary organizations, a Victorian professional's career prospects could be significantly advanced if he could claim that his knowledge was 'scientific' and in line with contemporary intellectual and technical trends. Thus, far from being remote from the intellectual ferment which was giving rise to the great debates of Victorian social and scientific theory, in the later nineteenth century there were both British officials and educated Indians for whom the expansion of education and publishing, and the growth and professionalization of the human sciences, created the essential context for their involvement in 'orientalist' knowledge-seeking.

Much was said about caste in this era of debate and administrative reconstruction, and many officials attached new importance to the old idea of so-called Brahmanical caste 'prejudices' as a force which was stronger and potentially more dangerous among some Indian peoples than others. The 1857 Rebellion had begun with an uprising of the Bengal Army's native infantrymen; the army's many critics now felt vindicated for the fears they had been expressing since the 1840s about the policy of making the Bengal regiments a preserve of lordly landed men. Most of these were Hindus who had been encouraged to lead a life of Brahman-centred piety; this was seen in retrospect to have fostered conspiracy and 'sedition' in the ranks. In the 1860s and 1870s there were attempts to find new and safer recruiting grounds, most notably in the Punjab and Nepal, which had long been perceived in colonial reportage as domains of comparatively 'casteless' martial uplanders. In other areas too, most notably in Rajasthan, there was a push to identify 'manly races' to recruit in place of the discredited Hindustan plainsmen who had dominated the pre-1857 Bengal Army. These concerns generated elaborate attempts to define which peoples, classes, or 'races' possessed appropriate martial qualities, with an insistence on minimizing the recruitment of 'Brahmanized' Indians, and an attempt to make the new regiments of supposedly casteless Sikhs, Gurkhas, and other incomers conscious of shared heritage and identity.

This period also brought the first timid moves to vest small groups of Indians with a limited measure of representative political power as members of the provincial legislative councils. And with the creation of India's first direct income tax, officials hoped to reduce the pressure on those 'peasant' groups who had supported the 1857 Rebellion. These were all developments which pushed officials to record and publish more social data than ever before, and to subject a far wider range of Indians to formal techniques of classification and enumeration. As was noted above, the all-India Census was the key instrument here. In their different and often contradictory ways, the compilers of the decennial censuses treated the phenomena they knew as caste as fundamental to the lives of many if not all Indians, compiling data on the supposed differentials of rank and status between caste groups in ways which stimulated fierce debate among both Britons and Indians.

There was also much 'essentializing' reportage in the monumental 119-volume series of *Imperial Gazetteers* which was produced under

the direction of one of India's most influential scholar-officials, W.W. Hunter (1840–1900). Many other forms of statistical and analytical material emanated from government operations in arenas ranging from state-funded education to the administration of forests, fisheries, hospitals, jails, and public works. These and other domains of state power were rapidly creating centralized bureaucracies at provincial and all-India level, and were recruiting ever larger numbers of literate Indians to collect and tabulate their data. Ever larger numbers of people were therefore familiarized with the terminology and conventions of these 'orientalist' enterprises.

This period's profound though uneven economic changes were equally important in the making of these denser and more probing forms of orientalism. The take-off of commercial agriculture, the expansion of the roads, railways, and steam-powered shipping networks, and the large-scale movement of labour into new areas of cash-crop production, all generated demands for data and official categorization, with much discussion of which kinds of people were mentally and physiologically suitable for the Ceylon tea estates, the rubber plantations of Malaya, and the other overseas migration zones. As increasing numbers of Indians were brought into the cash nexus, there was a growing range of situations in which would-be wage workers, military recruits, and many other seekers of new economic opportunities found it either necessary or desirable to present themselves to some outside authority or agency for purposes of formal classification. As Chapter 5 will show, it was often people of very low standing in conventional caste terms who made significant gains in these circumstances, even though this process of categorization helped to strengthen and perpetuate their identification as 'untouchables'.

There were also problems of control in the expanding commercial and industrial towns, encouraging the police and other officials to devise mass surveillance techniques which emphasized corporate 'essentialisms'. In the countryside, colonial officials charged with the imposition or 'settlement' of standard rates of land revenue moved to abolish the revenue differentials which had formerly benefited such people as arms-bearers and the descendants of Brahman specialists recruited by pre-colonial rulers. This process generated much talk of tillers who were 'skilful' and productive by nature—the sturdy 'Jat', the 'manly' Kanbi 'race', the thrifty 'Shanar'—as opposed to declining

parasitical 'Rajputs', 'thievish' Kallars, or Marava arms-bearers and 'feckless' hill- and forest-dwelling 'aboriginals'. These stereotypes both echoed and enhanced the differentiations which many Indians were now making along the lines described in the previous chapter, that is between the upright man of Brahman or merchant *ahimsa* values and the various aggressive, parasitical, or 'uncivilized' peoples from whom they were now seeking to distinguish themselves.

None of these developments was wholly new, as was shown above in the discussion of early colonial legal debates. But this typing of people by caste or caste-like statuses was made considerably more comprehensive during the later nineteenth century. Until the launching of the decennial all-India Census, it had never before officially been said that all Indians, rural and urban, elite and lowly, could or should be included in a single master exercise of tabulation which would identify every adult individual by both 'religion' and caste or so-called tribal 'community', as well as by occupation, age, and sex.

Indeed the counting of women was one of the great novelties of this process: not until 1872 were women included as 'members' of individual castes by the compilers of local population statistics. It may seem self-evident today that a woman born of a certain jati or 'sub-caste' should be regarded as a permanent 'member' of that caste or birth-group. This is, in fact, an issue on which modern anthropologists have been divided, particularly among those north Indians who are held to practise hypergamous 'upward' marriage. For these groups it is a man's caste identity that has generally been seen as comparatively fixed and stable, while that of an 'up' marrying bride may be seen as undergoing readjustment to match that of her new marital kin. Some of the more perceptive colonial commentators were also familiar with hypergamous marriage strategies, and were far from simplistic in their account of how this affected regional caste 'systems'. Indeed this is one of the many instances of 'colonial' knowledge being richer and more nuanced than is sometimes thought. It is certainly not a case of fabricated ethnographic findings being somehow imposed on Indians in ways that then made them change their values or everyday actions.

At the same time, growing numbers of Indians acquired an interest in orientalist writings and statistical exercises particularly the

classified caste tables in the provincial Census reports. It certainly was an innovation for these publications to rank, standardize and cross-reference their caste listings on principles derived from Western zoology and botanical classification. These exercises purported to aggregate and rank supposedly comparable castes from different regions under a variety of general occupational headings with the aim of establishing who was superior to whom in any part of India by virtue of their supposed purity, occupational origins, and collective moral worth.

There were the bureaucratic operations which made it appear that colonial ethnographers regarded castes as a giant ladder of precedence defined by the logic of the four-varna scheme, with every jati a fixed unit possessing a known place and status which could be measured against that of any other caste group. Actually, not all scholar-officials identified Indians in terms of botanical or zoological specimens, and some at least strongly criticized these exercises. Many data-collectors were well aware that these tabulations were little more than a caricature of the complex and multi-faceted reality of caste.

Yet Indians did have reason to take these listings seriously, most notably when they found the authorities using them for such purposes as deciding which communities were 'manly' enough to provide recruits for the colonial army. Indeed the experience of caste is and probably always has been shaped by what was done when rulers and their agents spoke with authority on matters of collective rank and 'essences'. By the end of the century, a growing array of official materials including military recruitment manuals, gazetteers, and Census reports featured listings assigning people of particular title and background to a certain order of status ('ruling' or 'military' caste, for example, as opposed to 'scavengers' and 'lower village menials'), with either honourable or ignominious qualities being imputed to each group.

It is no wonder that many Indians took these matters seriously, becoming skilled in manipulating the Census lists, and taking pains to communicate their views and claims about these processes both to other Indians and to the colonial authorities. Indeed, by the later nineteenth century there were some Indians with appropriate scribal and statistical skills who launched their own caste enumeration projects, in some cases adapting colonial Census methods in order to supplement older forms of almanac data produced to popularize

regional guru networks and holy places. And as far as the official British Census was concerned, the debates and protests that ensued from the compiling of these listings involved both Indians and British scholar-officials. These exchanges undeniably gave new shape and emphasis to what we would now see as the everyday reality of caste.

Caste and the Race Theorists

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, British ideas about caste cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the growing force of ethnological race science in the interpretation of social data, not just in India, but in both the West and the wider colonial world. By the end of the century, the emerging academic field of anthropology had become a crucial reference point in the writings of scholar-officials in India. Many were keen followers of the debates which engaged contributors to the new discipline's metropolitan publications, especially those like the *Journal of Anthropology*, the *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, and *The Anthropological Review* which were dominated by ethnologists.

At the same time, those claiming expertise on south Asian life and thought were active in the shaping of the new discipline's debates and modes of inquiry; by the end of the century, a number of major Indian cities contained flourishing anthropological societies. Both Indian and British writers contributed to these societies' journals. Indeed one of the earliest expressions by an Indian scholar of a nationalist political version of Aryan race theory appeared in 1863 in the *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*. This essay was by Gannender Mohun Tagore, professor of both Hindu law and Bengali language at University College, London (1861–5). In the essay, the author cites evidence from Strabo, Herodotus, and the *Institutes* of Manu on the origins of 'Brahmanical polity' in ancient India (which he calls 'Aryavarta'), and contrasts the 'wild independence' of India's 'aboriginal tribes' with the 'superior genius' of the 'Aryan race', and the leading role which its builders of advanced political order had played in the 'progressive development' of all humanity.*

*The term 'Aryavarta' was popularized by Hindu nationalists, and also by the Conservative peer Lord Ronaldshay (Governor of Bengal at the time of the 1919 Amritsar massacre). Ronaldshay's ethnological polemic *The Heart*

From these interactions between metropolitan and Indian concerns and institutions emerged two important but very different accounts of caste. Those, like Hunter, as well as the key figures of H.H. Risley (1851–1911) and his protégé Edgar Thurston, who were disciples of the French race theorist Topinard and his European followers, subsumed discussions of caste into theories of biologically determined race essences, and thereby played a critical role in the intellectual history of India and the Empire at large. Their great rivals were the material or occupational theorists led by the ethnographer and folklorist William Crooke (1848–1923), author of one of the most widely read provincial *Castes and Tribes* surveys, and such other influential scholar-officials as Denzil Ibbetson and E.A.H. Blunt.

To start with the first of these two schools of thought—the racial understanding of caste—the teachings of the nineteenth-century race theorists are rightly abhorred today. Nevertheless, their ideas can still be discerned in the doctrines of many late twentieth-century ultranationalist movements both in the West and in the extra-European world, including those of south Asia's Hindu and Muslim ethnic supremacists.

As has already been seen, references to race—and particularly the idea of ancient migrations by members of a primordial Aryan (or sometimes 'Hindu') 'race' or 'nation' of fair-skinned, vigorous freedom-lovers—featured in the writings of Sir William Jones and his contemporaries. But these eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century orientalist did not conceive of race in the physiological and evolutionary terms which were embraced by later ethnological theorists. With the rise of the new 'scientific' anthropology both within and beyond the Empire, older conventions and typologists were picked up and reshaped in a spirit of deep anxiety about matters which were certainly relevant to empire, but which were not confined to the exercise of power in any one colonial milieu. On the contrary, the evolutionary principles which had been widely embraced in Western countries from the mid-nineteenth century were rooted in a vision of all humanity as contestants in a ceaseless racial struggle. Ethnologists saw these conflicts as subject to merciless and impersonal scientific

of *Aryavarta* (1925) sounded dire warnings about the supposedly dangerous nature of India's nationalist political awakening.

laws. Some observers of empire interpreted these laws to mean that Britain's global power might one day be superseded by the rise of 'fresher' and more 'vigorous' peoples or nations, meaning the Germans or the Japanese, or even Britain's so-called Aryan 'cousins' in India.

From the mid-century, many of the most influential compilations of Indian ethnographic data were shaped by these ethnological perspectives. This was a form of 'orientalism' which did not treat caste as the defining feature of history and social organization for all Indians. On the contrary, followers of ethnology portrayed India as a composite social landscape in which only certain peoples had evolved historically in ways which left them 'shackled' by a hierarchical ideology of caste. Paradoxically these 'Brahmanized' Indians were identified by ethnologists as those who possessed superior 'Aryan' blood, meaning that they were supposedly descended from the same racial 'stock' as the white European, whose key ethnological endowment was the capacity to achieve 'nationhood'.

Much was made of this idea that in ethnological terms, so-called Aryan Indians were true though debased versions of their British conquerors, with a common racial heritage of 'virility' and warlike energy. Those who subscribed to these perspectives generally held that the development of caste ideologies had taken the 'Asiatic' branch of the 'Aryan family' into an evolutionary cul-de-sac. Yet according to many commentators, this was potentially reversible. As of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 'Aryan' caste Hindus were widely said by both Indian and British race theorists to be 'awaking' in evolutionary terms. For many, the proof of this was the formation of such organizations as the Indian National Congress and the Hindu 'revivalist' Arya Samaj, both of which were held to show that Indians were acquiring a sense of 'national' purpose which might ultimately supersede their supposedly divisive jati and varna affinities.

When ethnologists studied caste, then, most of them were doing so as a subsidiary exercise in this supposedly higher and grander task of uncovering the evolutionary heritage of all humanity. Furthermore, even when they contributed to such 'orientalist' exercises as the Census and the Imperial Gazetteers, the theorists did not necessarily see the entire Indian (or Hindu) population as part of an all-pervading 'caste system' which made all Indians radically inferior to their white colonial rulers.

It is true that Risley, who was the Empire's leading proponent of ethnology from the 1890s until his death in 1911, saw caste as a real factor in Indian life, an 'elemental force like gravitation or molecular attraction' that in his view gave order to the society, and saved it from chaos. Risley also anticipated the fieldwork methodologies and even some of the analytical insights of late-twentieth-century anthropologists. Indeed there is a surprisingly modernizing tone to some of his observations. This can best be seen in his advocacy of detailed local kinship studies, on the basis of which he claimed to have found certain 'tribal' populations undergoing what in the 1960s came to be called 'Sanskritisation', that is, the taking on of the attributes of a conventional ranked Hindu jati.

Risley is best known for his scheme of hierarchical classification which divided Indians into seven racial 'types', with dark-skinned 'Dravidians' defined as the most 'primitive', and fair 'Indo-Aryan' the most ethnologically 'advanced'. His most widely quoted remark is his claim to have discovered an unfailing 'law' of caste, this being that 'the social status of . . . a particular group varies in inverse ratio to the mean relative width of their noses'.* As Census Commissioner for the 1901 Census of India and honorary director of the Ethnological Survey of the Indian Empire, Risley's chief priority was the placing of Indian ethnological research on what he called a 'proper' official footing. He conceived of grand schemes for the mapping and measurement of every racial 'type' and 'specimen' in the subcontinent, and shared with other ethnologists the fear that Britain was being outdone by Germany in the official sponsorship of race science.

This was a worrying prospect since ethnology taught that the display of 'masterful' intellect was a mark of collective racial vigour, and thus a sign of a nation's capacity to dominate and civilise its supposed racial inferiors. Only the 'higher-races' were fit for 'places of power' on the world stage. Ethnological publications had been speculating since the 1860s about the comparative racial strengths of the

*The ethnologists' favoured technique of anthropometry classified human 'types' on the basis of physical characteristics derived from zoological taxonomies, particularly skull shape (long-headed/'dolicho-cephalic' or short-headed/'brachy-cephalic'). Some specialists also tested skin and eye colour; many advocated classifications based on measurements of nasal width and facial structures.

British and their 'Teutonic' rivals. Risley argued that it would be proof that Britain was losing its lead as a dynamic and racially purposeful power if Britons failed to exploit India's unique potential as a field for ethnological research.

Thus, to the more romantic and visionary followers of this discipline, the purpose of ethnological inquiry was far more than a matter of solving the colonial state's administrative and strategic problems. All peoples, said the advocates of race science, whether they were writing about Asians, Africans, or Europeans, were predisposed to weakness or strength, subjugation or dominance, slavishness or freedom-loving individualism, on the basis of racial factors which could be most accurately mapped in physiological rather than linguistic or environmental terms. Race was perceived as a universal human endowment, and all humankind was subject to its forces of blood and inheritance.

'Civilization', however, was equated by ethnologists with a bent towards the creation of libertarian political institutions. Those who had achieved this 'civilized' state were thus to be seen as members of ethnologically 'advanced' races. In some cases, however, it was India's 'pre-Aryan aboriginals' and other supposedly 'free' and 'casteless' peoples who were thought to be 'virile' and dynamic in ethnological terms. Commentators with these views often drew racial conclusions from contemporary history, particularly from key moments of colonial crisis, including the 1857 Mutiny-Rebellion and the 1855-7 insurrection of the 'tribal' Santal people of Bengal. Surprising though it may seem, these events told some ethnologists that the potential for true 'nationhood' could be discerned in the actions of these Indians, especially such 'pre-Aryan' people as the Santals and so-called Bediya 'gypsies' of Bengal. Both Indian and British ethnologists took this view. Yet another Bengali contributor to a London race science journal, Babu Rajendralala Mitra, says of the Bediya: 'attachment to their nationality is extreme . . .; no Bediya has ever been known to denounce his race.'

According to a number of writers, however, ethnological dynamism and receptiveness of 'civilizing' influences were most notable in those cases where hill and forest 'aboriginals' had begun to embrace Christianity. Thus religion too was widely regarded as an expression of racial endowments, with the faith of the modern 'enlightened'

Christian being characterized as the apex of human moral evolution, and subjection to Brahmanical 'priestcraft' a sign of comparative evolutionary backwardness. Above all, there were held to be eternal deep-seated antipathies between those who were supposedly higher on this scale of evolutionary attainment and those of inferior or 'debased' and 'degenerate' blood. The ethnologists' tracing of racial interactions presumed a landscape of danger, competition, and animosity, with all human history as a manifestation of these unforgiving ethnological principles. As understood by race theorists, the laws of human evolution allowed of no security for those who had made evolutionary 'advances', including those peoples who had established themselves as rulers and civilizers. Even those endowed with superior ethnological qualities were eternally vulnerable; the global 'struggle for mastery' allowed of no permanent winners or survivors, and degeneration or even annihilation were inescapable for even the fittest and most vigorous of racial groups.

This vision of eternal evolutionary race war is explicitly endorsed in the writings of W.W. Hunter, one of the earliest exponents of the new anthropological methodologies within the Indian Civil Service.* Hunter's extravagantly written *Annals of Rural Bengal*, published in 1868, portrays the Bengal region as a living ethnological battleground. Its social order, he proclaimed, was shaped by a history of titanic warfare between ancient Sanskrit-speaking 'Aryans' and the rude 'aboriginal races', who had been overrun in the 'primitive time' by the bearers of superior 'Aryan civilization'.

Far from serving as a static display of conventional 'caste' relationships, Bengal's human 'specimens' provide Hunter with a picture of grim, degenerative, racial catastrophe: 'Our earliest glimpses of the human family in India disclose two tribes of widely different origin, struggling for the mastery.' According to Hunter, the incoming Aryans 'came of a conquering stock' and were imbued with 'that high sense of nationality which burns in the hearts of a people who believe themselves, the depositary of a divine revelation.' In Bengal, however,

*Hunter attained renown with the publication of *Annals of Rural Bengal*, written when he was Collector of the remote Bhirkhum district. He became India's first Director General of Statistics (1871) and chief editor of the first Imperial Gazetteers of India.

the once-noble Aryan conquerors gradually lost out, becoming degenerate and contaminating their 'enlightened' faith with 'degrading superstitions' absorbed from what Hunter calls, revoltingly, the 'squat, black [aboriginal] races'.*

On this basis, Hunter, like many of his contemporaries, insisted that the Indian order of castes had been misperceived as an ancient and immutable system based on Hindu *religious* principles, and dividing the entire Indian population into the all-encompassing varnas of classic Indological theory. Caste for Hunter was quite different: a 'cruel' but diverse and regionally specific creation of relatively recent *race* history. It appeared in India in two distinct forms. First, says Hunter, caste in its 'true' sense was a creation of Aryan settlers in Gangetic Upper India where in comparatively recent times the original 'fresh' and virile Aryan 'fighting tribes' had gradually subsided into degeneracy, becoming a society of 'mild-eyed philosophers' strolling aimlessly in their mango groves, creating pointlessly elaborate rituals, and wrangling over empty points of sectarian doctrine. This, for Hunter, was the counter-evolutionary development that produced caste in its 'true' Aryan form, that is, as a 'national code', 'disfiguring' the strengths of unified Aryan 'nationhood' and 'ruining' the 'Sanskrit people'.

Secondly, and in sharp contrast to his idea of caste in this Upper Indian or 'Aryan' form, Hunter gives an account of caste in Bengal. This he sees as a region where what Europeans thought of as caste was actually a 'deformed' institution, one which was fundamentally different from the social norms created by hegemonic 'Aryans' in Hindustan. In Bengal, he wrote, what was called caste was actually a manifestation of race war, that is, a product of the opposition of 'high' and 'low' races, the 'conquerors and the conquered'. Far from representing a purely 'social' distinction between different ranks of the same superior 'Aryan', caste in Bengal was for Hunter an embodiment of differentiation and irreconcilable revulsion between radically unlike races. As a result, the emergence of what Hunter saw as an extreme ideology of stratification and ritual ranking between caste groups was

*These views about the supposedly corrupting consequences of inter-racial contact were shared by ethnological generalizers like Robert Knox, who discerned the 'mysterious unextinguishable dislike of race to race' as the central principle of humankind's evolutionary history, and regarded it as a key task of the ethnologist to warn against racial 'hybridization'.

to be explained in evolutionary racial terms. Vegetarianism and the other rules of a Bengali high-‘caste’ lifestyle reflected the ‘higher’ race’s deep-seated abhorrence for the ‘black-skinned, human-sacrificing, flesh-eating forest tribes’.

Of course there is no intention here to give any credence to this repellent material. Yet it is important to see that for Hunter, Risley, and their fellow race theorists the point of such analysis was that *all* societies had an ethnological story to tell. In this story Indians were not all characterized in the same evolutionary terms. Race theorists did not refer to Indians and Europeans as members of two distinct or homogeneous races, and neither the ‘Aryan’ nor the non-‘Aryan’ Indian was dismissed by all race theorists as the evolutionary ‘inferior’ of all so-called Aryan whites.

Nor, even more importantly, was this ethnological story one in which caste occurs as the paramount institution of Indian life. Like Hunter, Darwin’s champion, T.H. Huxley, writing in 1869, conceived of a racially diverse India in which the two predominant groupings were, yet again strong, pale Aryans and small, dark, defeated Dravidians, the dispossessed ancestors of modern India’s ‘primitive’ southern ‘hill tribes’. Emphasizing yet again the ethnologist’s motif of universal race confrontation, these groups’ supposed conflicts, migrations, and inter-breeding had purportedly marked out the subcontinent into contentious historic battle zones of separate culture, language and racial ‘type’.

Huxley’s contemporary, Walter Elliot, wrote in similar terms, subdividing the peoples of south India into no less than six distinct racial categories. In his view the bearers of a particular ‘caste’ title were never marked off from other groups by the physiological marks and endowments on which ethnologists relied to classify what they thought of as higher and lower ‘types’ and ‘races’. ‘Parias’, he says, were sometimes ‘fair and tall’ with ‘good’ features; other members of the same ‘nation’ were ‘black and squat’, with ‘the lowest and most debased cast of countenance’.

It should be noted then that Victorian race theorists generally subscribed to this view that Brahman-centred caste ideologies were absent or unimportant in the lives of significant numbers of Indians. Caste, as they saw it, was an evolutionary weapon adopted in the distant past by certain Indians, primarily the descendants of light-skinned superior Aryans who devised conventions of exclusion and ritual

distance in a struggle to maintain the purity of their 'blood' and race in circumstances demanding extraordinary measures of ethnological boundary-making. All this was consistent with the strongly eugenicist overtones of ethnology, which taught that degeneration and racial decline were the inevitable consequence of 'miscegenation' between peoples of advanced and inferior racial 'stock'.

Elliot therefore assigns to a single racial category the Kurumba hill people of Malabar and other so-called 'simple' hunting and pastoral groups whom he sees as close racial kin of the Bengal Santals. For Elliot, these peoples' chief ethnological trait was that they were 'free and unfettered by caste', sharing a common descent from a single 'highly civilized' population with a marked ethnological taste for 'freedom'. Like Hunter, Elliot made much of these and other 'pre-Aryan' peoples, who were supposedly endowed with 'noble' and 'independent' racial traits and whom he saw as having been oppressed over many centuries by so-called Brahman tyranny. Such views were widely reaffirmed after 1900 as offering 'scientific' justification for the claims of those who called themselves representatives of both 'non-Brahmanism' and the interests of so-called primordial or 'tribal' (Adi Dharm and Adi Dravida) peoples.

In contrast to other south Indians, whom he assigns to four separate categories of unfree, servile, predatory, and 'civilized' people, Elliot asserts that the Kurumba were formerly independent princes of Malabar; in the Carnatic the same people formed a 'federal community' of '24 states or castes'. The sad modern plight of these once-strong warrior-pastoralists is for Elliot a demonstration of that key principle of the racial theorists, this being the notion of the decay or degeneration of race, the result of various phenomena including racial 'miscegenation' and the superseding of free, 'democratic' government by 'despotism'.

This vision of free tribal republicanism is strikingly reminiscent of Henry Maine's discussion of primordial Indian 'village republics'. Elliot therefore applies to 'Dravidian' south India a form of evolutionary political analysis that was already being spelled out in the works of theorists who were concerned, not just with India, but with all societies in which particular legal and constitutional forms were regarded as markets of free 'citizenries' and 'republican' liberties, both in the past and among living 'primitives'.

Other scholar-officials also distinguished between 'new' and 'old

Aryans', the 'old' being those whose institutions were 'less democratic' than those of later racial colonizers who supposedly shaped the societies of both north and south India. In the Punjab, especially, the first Aryan migrants were supposedly succeeded by waves of 'advancing Jats'. These 'robust and warlike' people were members of a 'fresher race' whose institutions were hailed for their superior ethnological qualities. 'In their institutions they are extremely democratic; every village is a perfect little republic.'

The Material or Occupational Interpretation of Caste

To turn now to the second of the two schools of thought mentioned above, this picture of 'fresh', vigorous and 'democratic' Jats had a strong impact on Denzil Ibbetson's portrayal of caste in the Punjab. Ibbetson too perceived Brahmans and Brahmanical standards of rank and hierarchy as a marginal feature of this regional society. On much else, however, materialists such as Ibbetson, Crooke, Blunt, John Nesfield, and William Logan differed profoundly from those like Risley who saw race as the paramount factor in the analysis of caste.

Ibbetson's work, in particular, prefigures some of the most sophisticated insights of modern caste theorists, particularly in its insistence on diversity and historicity in the making of caste. Far from generalizing about the whole of India as a uniform 'caste society', Ibbetson saw the Punjab as a highly distinctive environment in which the aspiring theorist of caste had to explain the distinctively non-'castelike' features of much of its rural population. He saw caste ideologies as having come to be manifested in highly varied ways in different regional settings, insisting on the dynamic and fluid nature of caste, and giving much emphasis to material and political factors in the shaping of these different versions of *jati* and *varna*.

Although at some points Ibbetson's discussion echoes the standard orientalist clichés about lascivious Brahmans and 'degraded' Hindu 'ritualism', he moves on to another plane entirely in his account of the landowners, cultivators, and pastoralists who constituted as much as half of the Punjab's population in the later nineteenth century. These people he describes as open and flexible in their deployment

of such 'caste' names as Rajput, Jat, Meo, Gujar, and Thakur; they are emphatically not passive, tyrannized victims of received 'Brahmanical' orthodoxies. To him, such titles as Jat and Rajput signalled distinctions of political power which were fluid and variable, and not closed units of hierarchical 'caste' identity. Human agency is pre-eminent at every stage in Ibbetson's analysis. Thus 'caste' as a Brahman's vision of the world, a vision emphasizing rank, purity, and what he calls 'artificial' criteria of lifestyle including vegetarianism and prohibitions on widow-marriage, is a known reference point to which these rural 'yeomen' may or may not defer, depending in part on the strength of the anti-Brahmanical Sikh and Muslim faiths in their home locales.

For Ibbetson, then, both the Punjab and the northwest frontier regions were open societies where the difference between the 'Jat' and the 'Rajput' was not a matter of blood or fixed ethnological fact, nor a response to universal Brahman scriptural mandates inherited from the ancient past. In his view, such differentiations were a fluid representation of status as claimed by men of power. Furthermore, 'tribe' and not 'caste' was for Ibbetson the universal fact of rural life in the Punjab. Nesfield says much the same in his account of caste in the North Western Provinces. In Ibbetson's work, the word tribe refers to affiliations such as Chauhan, Sial, and Punwar, by which, he says, kin-based groups from within his rural 'yeoman' populations define themselves as superior holders of localized agrarian territories.

Ibbetson's emphasis is thus on these factual and visible realities of power and land control as opposed to the open and variable measurements of status which he regards as being embodied in the use of such 'caste' titles as Jat or Rajput. As far as Rajputs are concerned, the title Rajput was not a measurement of superior 'Aryan' blood as it was for the ethnologists; it was instead a reference to the indigenous 'occupational' facts of kingliness and power, and the bonds of affiliation and patronage through which a lord acknowledges the services of his retainers. There was nothing fixed or immutable about these identities. 'In former times, before caste distinctions had become crystallized, any tribe or family whose ancestor . . . rose to royal rank became in time Rajput.' And in his own time, the process of shifting and realigning of 'caste' rank was 'going on daily around us'.

With hindsight, it seems likely that the ideas of the ethnologists

about human actions as expressions of immutable scientific laws and race essence would have sounded more persuasive to officials with experience of Bengal and the far south, rather than other provinces. This would be consistent with the more paternalist administrative traditions that had emerged in the Punjab and some parts of the Gangetic northwest. In particular, those involved in administering the Punjab canal colonies and comparable schemes of interventionist economic 'uplift' elsewhere would have had reason to be dubious about theories which appeared to deny agency and individual initiative to at least some Indians, especially to the 'sturdy peasants' and 'virile tribesmen' who were expected to make good, 'manly' soldiers, and to be receptive and energetic in their response to 'improving' administrative influence. At the same time, much of what Ibbetson says about caste in the Punjab suggests not idealistic fantasizing, but a high degree of accuracy in his observations of Punjab society. Despite his use of dated 'colonial' language, and his inevitable dependence on observations made through the operations of colonial revenue settlement work, in his writing we really do see the beginning of modern regionally-based Indian anthropology.

Furthermore, it is not surprising that these interpreters of caste have had a more enduring influence than their ethnological rivals. Ibbetson and his fellow believers in the occupational and material basis of caste were after all in tune with yet another key strand in the thinking of Western social theorists. This was the attempt in both liberal and emerging Marxist analysis to formulate economic understandings of the past—and also of the contemporary world—with growing importance attributed to modes of property holding, as well as an interest in the interactions of labour and capital.*

Between Ibbetson and Risley, then, there certainly was no homogenizing colonial 'consensus' on the subject of caste. In the writings of Ibbetson, and also in Crooke and Blunt, there is no message of

*Studies of European feudal law and land rights by the Victorian medievalists F.W. Maitland and P.G. Vinogradoff were a crucial influence here. Marx himself regarded India as a cellular and fragmented society. Thus, while he emphasized material rather than religious or ideological factors, he adhered to fairly conventional orientalist views in representing the colonial conquest and resulting Westernization as the only social revolution that had ever taken place in the subcontinent.

doom and degeneration in regard to the familiar old theme of environmentally propitious regions—the Punjab hills, the arid open terrain of Rajasthan—where Rajputs, Jats, and Pathans supposedly displayed the ‘hardy’, ‘chivalrous’, and individualist qualities of a ‘tribal’ social and political order. The influence of James Tod, the most influential early historian of the Rajput ‘race’, is particularly marked here, together with that of other early-nineteenth-century commentators whose key point of reference was the theme of constitutional liberties, and the mapping of societies which were supposedly comparable to those from which the freedom-loving Briton had evolved.

It was on this basis that Tod and his admirers had made much of the free-speaking, un-Brahmanized, and egalitarian ‘tribal’ arms-bearers whom they believed to have flourished in zones of temperate terrain and climate. The influence of this environmental logic is apparent in the work of Crooke, Blunt, and a number of other writers. In their works, when ‘hardy’ populations of this type can be identified, they are not to be lumped with weaker and ‘unmanly’ lowland peoples for whom caste constituted a very different and much more debilitating bond of social and moral adhesion, and who were therefore corruptible and submissive in the face of priestcraft and despotism. ‘The Bengali and his cousin from Assam may be . . . identified by their lanky stature . . . and want of robustness. With them . . . the intellectual have grown at the expense of the physical qualities . . . and they would in troubled times fall easy victims to the stronger races from the upper plains and hills.’ For the great majority of plains-dwellers, ‘[a] powerful priesthood and the bondage of caste repress originality of thought and freedom of action’.

The point, however, is that not all Indians were thought to be like this.

In . . . [Rajputana] the Rajputs have maintained their tribal system and freedom unimpaired [even after the expansion of Mughal, Maratha and British power] . . . In a Rajput State the chief is the head of the clan by whom the country was settled. He is not a despot, but exercises a jurisdiction more or less limited over an aristocracy, the members of which are his kinsmen and connections . . . This is not exactly feudalism, but something resembling it. It is the only really free constitution within the Empire . . . Most . . . observers of Rajputs and Jats . . . consider them to be of the same stock . . . The Jats are a most interesting people . . . [Their]

character seems to be largely the result of environment—they have grown grave and impassive like the great white oxen which they prize so dearly . . . [The Jat] is a fine, manly fellow, and has special interest for us because his tribe supplies some of our best Sikh sepoy.

[Rajputs are] . . . liable to sudden outbreaks of passion . . . [and a] tendency to panic on the battlefield, [with an] inability, as a result of their tribal system, to form a permanent combination against a public enemy . . . These defects they share with most orientals, but, on the whole, they compare favourably with other races in the Indian Empire. There is much in their character and institutions which reminds us of the Gauls as pictured by Mommsen [in his *History of Rome* 1866) . . .

It is clear then that even at their most arrogantly 'essentializing', these writers were discerning elements in India's social order which they found both admirable and alarming. Furthermore, their responses to this did not involve a stereotype of all Indians, or even all 'caste Hindus', as timid or unmanly.

For Ibbetson too, 'caste' differentials were therefore based on distinctions of occupation, individual achievement, and political resources, rather than concepts of higher or lower 'types' and 'races'. His Indians are individuals, achievers of land, power, and distinction by virtue of personal attainment and historically dynamic interactions, not passive recipients of race essences or binding cultural codes. And above all, he insisted that the standing of different groups in a particular locality was governed by political considerations, that is, the distinction between those who ruled and those who were politically 'subject'.*

It is notable that some of the most sophisticated official anthropology of the early twentieth century was therefore moving in the same direction in its analysis of Indian society as the 'progressive wing' of the Indian National Congress. This can further be seen in the similarity

*For an attempt to rehabilitate the racial understanding of caste, see the Ethnographical reports in the *Census of India 1931* (I, sections A and B); while rejecting Risley's crucial differentiation between descendants of 'pure' Aryan invaders and 'aboriginal' Dravidians, J.H. Hutton and his collaborator B.S. Guha of the Indian Zoological Survey tried to use this Census to reaffirm the value of race science, using elaborate anthropometric techniques to create what they saw as a definitive analysis of India's 'racial constitution'.

between the views of Sir Malcolm Darling (1880–1964), author of *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (1925), and the leading Congress Socialists, including Jawaharlal Nehru. It is this emerging public debate about caste within the Indian intelligentsias which is the subject of the next chapter.

The Ordering of Difference*

THOMAS R. METCALF

The strategies devised by the British to comprehend India were never simply intellectual exercises, nor were they meant only in some general way to justify British rule over the subcontinent. Always these theories, whether of race or gender, of an unchanging or of a feudal India, found meaning as they were used to order India's peoples and their past. Through them what the British conceived of as India's enduring difference was given shape in administrative practices. This process of ordering India was not driven wholly by political objectives. It was also part of the larger Enlightenment endeavour, by observation and study, to understand the world outside Europe, as Europeans came to know it more fully. A relentless need to count and classify everything they encountered defined much Victorian intellectual activity. For the most part too, as they set out to order the peoples who inhabited their new Indian dominion, the British sought to fit the categories they used to the society they purported to describe.

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Indeed, Indians themselves, especially the Brahmin informants and assistants who worked with the British, by the information they provided shaped much of the ethnographic project. Still, under the Raj the knowledge the British amassed cannot be separated from its role in the successful working of colonial rule. India was 'known' in ways that would sustain a system of colonial authority, and through categories that made it fundamentally different from Europe.

The theories of 'difference' the British devised, as we have seen, despite their claims to scientific precision, were never wholly coherent, nor were they free of internal contradiction. As they were deployed by India's colonial administrators, these contradictions became ever more difficult to contain. Often mutually inconsistent theories were cobbled together to achieve particular political purposes, and controversy frequently erupted over how best to fit the ungainly facts of India's social order into the 'proper' modes of explanation. Inevitably, the endeavour to create a coherent social order involved the creation everywhere of what could only be called 'exceptions'. Furthermore, as the colonial sociology of India was tied to a system of power, the British necessarily eschewed at once those categories which would announce India's similarity to Britain and those which might threaten the colonial order. To be sure, classificatory schemes familiar to the British at home were not entirely absent. Occupation, for instance, played an important role in the British ordering of Indian society. Nevertheless, categories meant to denote India's difference, above all those of caste, community, and tribe, were placed at the heart of the country's social system. Class, by contrast, which Victorian Englishmen regarded as the great divide in their own society, was nowhere to be found in British accounts of India's peoples. Despite its inconsistencies and its subordination to the needs of colonial rule, the British ethnographic enterprise had far-reaching consequences for these various categories—of caste and community, of race and sect—informed the ways in which the British, and in time the Indians themselves, conceived of the basic structures of their society.

Ordering India's Peoples

Initially, as they first came to know India in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the British described its peoples through

a variety of classificatory systems in which occupational and caste rankings jostled with one other. There was unanimity on little more than the superior position of the Brahmin. Such views gained force from the textual studies of the early Oriental scholars, who adopted as their own the Brahminical view of India as a land whose peoples were forever fixed into positions defined by the four great *varna* categories of Brahmin, *ksatriya*, *vaisya*, and *sudra*, with the untouchables set beneath them all. By the turn of the nineteenth century, however, above all in the wake of the conquests of Lord Wellesley, when the British began to make their way into the Indian countryside, direct observation began to assume greater importance in the gathering of information on Indian society. The extensive tours of Francis Buchanan through Mysore and eastern India, and of Colin Mackenzie throughout southern India, can be said to have inaugurated the era of a 'scientific' understanding of India based on detailed local knowledge.

Both Buchanan and Mackenzie amassed vast amounts of information on the working of Indian society. In his survey of Bihar, Buchanan collected statistics on housing, health, occupation, family size, and education, among other subjects, and even attempted to estimate standards of living for various classes of labourers. So detailed are his statistics that modern researchers have sought to use them as a baseline from which to measure changes in economic well-being in the subsequent colonial era. In similar fashion, with the help of Brahmin assistants, Mackenzie collected local histories, religious and philosophical texts, coins, images, and antiquities, and made extensive plans and drawings wherever he went. Mackenzie's collecting enthusiasms far exceeded even the requirements of the colonial state, which remained always dubious of the value of his vast hordes of material. Although his collections announced Britain's control over India, Mackenzie's activities participated as much in the omnivorous empiricism characteristic of nineteenth-century British amateur science.

Neither Buchanan nor Mackenzie, as they toured India, paid much attention to what was later to define India's distinctiveness—the caste system. References to caste in the work of both men are haphazard and unsystematic. For Buchanan occupation largely defined the nature of caste, while Mackenzie's local histories for the most part recount the origins and doings of the chiefs and rajas of southern

India, not its castes. The British in India in these years of discovery also commissioned extensive collections of drawings of various castes and peoples of India. But these too, informed by romanticism and the cult of the picturesque, sought primarily to capture the likeness of colourfully dressed soldiers and courtiers, itinerant merchants, and exotic holy men, as well as those, identified by occupation, with whom the British came into daily contact, such as their own vast array of household servants. These lists and drawings were, moreover, highly idiosyncratic. No attempt was made to organize them into a coherent caste 'system'.

The lack of interest in a systematic ordering of caste during the early decades of the nineteenth century was not surprising. Engaged as they were in conquering the country, the British sought, above all else, immediately useful information about India's resources and the character of those chieftains whom they were endeavouring to subdue into revenue-paying subjects. While the drawings in such collections as Mackenzie's made India's 'difference' readily visible, British notions of the character of that 'difference' were not as yet clearly established, so that caste existed as no more than an ethnographic curiosity. Insofar as it claimed any meaning for the men of the generation of Macaulay and Trevelyan it was as an emblem of India's degradation, and as a barrier to its improvement.

As British rule by mid-century became increasingly secure, and as the reforming impulse waned, the colonial search for knowledge took on a new shape. After the Mutiny, anxious to rule India without disrupting its established social institutions, and driven by an ever more compelling commitment to 'scientific' understanding, the British set out to reduce to a comprehensible order what they saw as the baffling variety of India's myriad peoples. By the 1860s, as we saw in chapter 3, ideas of 'difference' defined an India that had become a 'laboratory of mankind' or 'living museum', where ancient customs, habits, and practices endured up to the present. Denied a history of their own, the peoples of India were defined by unchanging racial and cultural identities. The most important of these, by far, was caste. As Bernard Cohn has written, for late Victorian anthropologists 'a caste was a "thing", an entity which was concrete and measurable; above all it had definable characteristics—endogamy, commensality rules, fixed occupation, common ritual practices; and these 'things' could

be ascertained and quantified for reports and surveys. Once fitted together in an organized hierarchy, this 'system' could be taken as providing a comprehensive and authoritative understanding of Indian society. India was, in this view, no more than the sum of its parts, and the parts were castes. Of course, as we shall see, the apparent rigour was deceptive, for this 'system' had to accommodate kinship and 'tribe', and at times 'religion' as well.¹

This increasing systematization of caste was intimately connected with the development of photography. As much of the effort of ethnological classification was directed by a search for 'scientific' precision, the recording of 'exact' images by photography logically complemented the compiling of statistical information. Insofar as different castes were conceived of as representing distinct racial types, a photograph of a 'typical' member of an ethnic group could be used to identify the precise characteristics, of physiognomy, dress, and manners, that defined the group as a whole. Although photography had been used to record the 'ethnic types' of India from the early 1850s, the first full-scale compilation was *The Peoples of India*, an eight-volume work of 468 photographs published by the Government of India in 1868. Initially conceived by the governor-general, Lord Canning, and his wife as a collection of souvenirs for their own personal use, the work was transformed by the Mutiny of 1857, with its challenge to Britain's presumed knowledge of India, into an official project. Accurate information about India's peoples now mattered as never before.

Although *The Peoples of India*, like earlier collections, idiosyncratically mixed caste, varna, and occupational categories, and occasionally betrays what Christopher Pinney calls the 'moral preoccupations' of the reforming era, for the most part the work marked out a stage in the transformation of ethnological curiosity into 'a structured framework—the sort of "grid" to be found in museums and exhibitions—in which scientific theory and normalizing judgment predominate.' In its initial request for photographs, for instance, the Foreign Department asked the provincial governments to supply likeness of 'characteristic specimens' of each tribe within their jurisdiction, and to include for each not only the 'peculiar characteristics of costume' but 'the exact tint of their complexion and eyes'. Nor did the photographs stand alone. Each was accompanied by a brief account of what purported

to be that group's essential character. Gujars, for instance, were described as 'given to indiscriminate plunder in times of disturbance', while Banjaras had 'a reputation for perfect honesty'. (Consistency, however, was always elusive, for the Banjaras were later classified as a 'criminal' tribe.²)

Those, above all the educated Indians, who rejected the notion of their country as an ethnographic 'museum', vigorously endeavoured to distance themselves from this collection. Shown the volumes in the India Office in 1869, Sayyid Ahmed Khan was horrified to see his countrymen portrayed as 'the equal of animals'. With considerable embarrassment, his son Sayyid Mahmud told an inquiring official that, while he was a Hindustani, he was 'not one of the aborigines'. What, Sayyid Ahmed reflected sadly, could the young English official on his way to India think 'after perusing this book and looking at its pictures, of the power or honour of the natives of India?'³

As time went on Indian ethnography asserted ever more rigorously its scientific claims. Its categories, embedded in censuses, gazetteers, and revenue records, became ever more closely tied to the administrative concerns of the colonial state. At the heart of this ethnography remained always the study of caste. As H.H. Risley pronounced with vigour, in his own account of *The People of India*, caste 'forms the cement that holds together the myriad units of Indian society'. Were its cohesive power withdrawn or its essential ideas relaxed, he continued, the change 'would be more than a revolution; it would resemble the withdrawal of some elemental force like gravitation or molecular attraction. Order would vanish and chaos would supervene.'⁴

Despite this general agreement on the centrality of caste as an organizing principle for Indian society, what caste actually consisted of remained always a source of controversy. Several ethnographers, among them J.C. Nesfield and William Crooke, argued that castes were defined by the occupations pursued by their members. Others, most notably Risley, insisted on a physical basis for caste. In his view, by contrast to other areas such as Europe, where 'anthropometry has to confess itself hindered, if not baffled, by the constant intermixture of types obscuring and confusing the data ascertained by measurements', in India 'the process of fusion has long ago been arrested, and the degree of progress which it had made up to the point at which it ceased to operate is expressed in the physical characteristics of the groups

which have been formed.' Caste, that is, like race, was immutably inscribed on the bodies of India's peoples, and could be ascertained, so Risley argued, by measuring the nasal index. If, he said, 'we take a series of castes . . . and arrange them in order of the average nasal index, so that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top, and that with the coarsest at the bottom of the list, it will be found that this order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence.'⁵

While few were as confident as Risley of the explanatory value of particular measures such as the nasal index, most late-nineteenth-century ethnographers, in India as elsewhere, accepted the notion that anthropometric research had some value. Almost all measured skulls—if only, as in the case of Crooke, to contest Risley's more extravagant claims—took caste and photographs, and developed techniques of fingerprinting to identify criminals. In similar fashion, British ethnographers universally insisted that, whatever their defining characteristics, castes were discrete and distinct; and until after the First World War their mapping remained an enduring preoccupation. Nevertheless, despite the enthusiasm which drove forward the process of measurement, in administrative practice caste proved to be an awkward and unwieldy classificatory category. Even the mere enumeration of castes in the decennial census was a project of formidable difficulty. Constant efforts had to be made to reduce the bewildering array of caste names returned by individuals to a consistent order, and to fit all enumerated individuals properly into the assigned categories. Nor was it a simple matter to devise systems of classification which could contain the vast array of caste data.⁶

Most controversial was the effort to arrange castes hierarchically by 'social precedence'. In the various provincial 'Castes and Tribes' volumes, the authors sidestepped this nettlesome question by arranging the entries alphabetically. The 1891 census made some effort within larger occupational categories to list groups in accordance with their 'social estimation', but the self-confident Risley, as census commissioner a decade later, determined to secure an accurate ranked listing. To aid his own research, and to ensure that his lists accorded with 'native public opinion', he even consulted a wide array of Indians. The prescriptions found in Sanskrit legal textbooks, together with the opinions of Brahmin pandits, shaped the responses of most of these

informants; while the whole enterprise generated a vast outpouring of claims to higher status, especially among the members of middling castes such as Kayasthas and Khatris who felt entitled to rank as Ksatriya. Risley, however, had long since made up his own mind. What mattered was race. On the first page of the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Risley illustrated a stone panel from the Buddhist stupa at Sanchi depicting three women at prayer in front of an altar. In the background 'four stately figures . . . of tall stature and regular features . . . look on with folded hands in apparent approval.' The whole shows us, as Risley interpreted the scene, the 'higher' Aryan race on friendly terms with the 'lower' Dravidian, but 'keenly conscious of the essential difference of type.' 'Race sentiment', he concluded, resting upon a 'foundation of fact which scientific methods confirm', at once 'shaped the intricate grouping of the caste system, and has preserved the Aryan type in comparative purity throughout Northern India.'⁷

The persistence of fragmented ethnic identities at the heart of Indian society, in the view of most British ethnographers, foreclosed any effective unity amongst the country's peoples. Risley certainly was in no doubt about the political implications of a racially based caste system. Because castes, he insisted, were in India so sharply demarcated from each other, there existed 'no national type and no nation or even nationality in the ordinary sense of these words.' Risley nevertheless endeavoured to define a way by which India's castes could be reshaped so that they would play a role in the country's future political development. It may be said, he wrote, that the caste system 'with its singularly perfect communal organization, is a machinery admirably fitted for the diffusion of new ideas; that castes may in course of time group themselves into classes representing the different strata of society; and that India may thus attain, by the agency of these indigenous corporations, the results which have been arrived at elsewhere through the fusion of individual types.' The caste system, in this vision, could constitute a kind of civil society for India, which taught its peoples to work together. Ultimately, unlike the English language, confined to a tiny elite, caste might even help form a larger structure of shared values for the subcontinent. But Britain's presence would be needed for the foreseeable future to provide unity and leadership. In the end, of course, as the British patronage of caste helped embed it within Indian politics, Risley's vision found

substantial realization in what has increasingly become independent India's caste-based political system.⁸

The valorization of caste difference as fixed and immutable found perhaps its most striking expression in the creation of the two opposed groups of 'criminal tribes' and 'martial races'. The notion that certain caste groups practised crime as a hereditary profession—that, as one British official wrote, 'crime is their trade and they are born to it and must commit it'—followed logically from the assumptions that sustained the British view of the caste system, and more generally of Indian society. As there existed those destined to be carpenters or cultivators, so too were there those 'destined by the usage of caste to commit crime and whose dependents will be offenders against the law.' Many of these so-called criminal tribes, furthermore, as wanderers and vagrants, were outside the normal networks of sedentary society; hence they were believed to challenge British efforts to order and control their Indian dominion. The outcome was the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.

The notion that there existed groups in India predisposed to crime originated in the campaign against the thags during the 1830s. The thags, as we have seen, with their mysterious rituals of murder and worship directed to the goddess Kali, exerted a powerful fascination for the British, and so came to embody the 'mysterious' East. Inasmuch as thags were conceived of as being fundamentally different from ordinary criminals, W.H. Sleeman, as he set out to eradicate thagi, decided that no effort need be made to prove that a given individual had committed a particular crime. On the basis of thag genealogies which he put together, he argued that thagi was hereditary. Hence, it was sufficient for conviction to prove that an individual was a member of a thag gang. Although Sleeman successfully demonstrated the ability of the Raj to extirpate such gangs, largely through the use of informers' testimony, in the process the notion of distinct 'criminal communities', with its challenge to liberal ideas of individual responsibility and the procedural guarantees of the 'rule of law', became embedded in the legal framework of British India.⁹

In the wake of the 1857 uprising, the British determined to subdue all remaining low-status, wandering groups. Such concerns were not of course unique to India, for European governments had long been suspicious of gypsies and wandering vagabonds of all sorts. But for the

Raj of the 1860s it was a matter of special urgency, as only a settled village society, wholly under the supervision of a conservative landed elite, could guarantee the British the security they required. In the process, the spectre of thagi was revived and blown up to ever greater proportions. As the inspector-general of the North-Western Provinces Police wrote in 1867, 'It must be remembered, in dealing with the wandering predatory tribes of India, that the fraternities are of such ancient creation, their number so vast, the country over which their depredations spread so vast, their organization so complete, and their evil of such formidable dimensions, that nothing but special legislation will suffice for their suppression and conversion.' Now, however, as part of the new ethnography, caste affiliation, not the fictive kinship of gang membership, defined collective criminality. The 1871 act listed four tribes as criminal, out of some twenty-nine proposed by the police, and provided a mechanism through which additions could be, and were, made to their numbers in subsequent years. The members of such tribes were registered, and their movements restricted by a system of passes and roll-calls. Those found outside their prescribed place of residence were liable to arrest without a warrant.¹⁰

This effort to define specific 'criminal tribes' did not escape criticism. Several officials, among them the judges of the Punjab Chief Court, committed to the procedure of the ordinary criminal law, with its denial of Indian 'difference', urged that only individuals should be registered, and then restricted in their movements only when charged with crimes actually committed. Others pointed to the likelihood that such legislation would confound the innocent with the guilty, and might even drive those deprived of their customary livelihood to take up crime, as well as offering the police great opportunities for abuse of their power. Further, the avowed goal of reforming these criminals by settling them in special colonies under surveillance stood sharply at odds with the theory, underlying the act, of a hereditary predisposition to commit crime. Nevertheless, as time went on, the act was extended to include ever more 'tribals', and was finally repealed only after Independence.

The ideology sustaining the notion of 'criminal tribes' was not wholly a product of the colonial environment. Even in Victorian Britain the government feared the so-called 'dangerous' classes, who were conceived of as threatening public order. Hence in 1869, while

discussions regarding the 1871 act were underway in India, the Habitual Criminals Act incorporated into English law exceptional powers for the surveillance and control of those denominated 'habitual offenders'. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, during the unsettled decades from Peterloo to Chartism, fear of the lower orders as inherently revolutionary was widespread among the members of 'respectable' society. By the 1860s, with the extension of the franchise, as we have seen, the regularly employed working class began to be brought into the constitution. There remained only the 'habitual offenders'. Conceived of as a separate criminal class, perhaps even biological degenerates born to a life of crime, these men required a separate coercive apparatus for their control. Yet the category of the 'habitual offender' remained always sharply differentiated from its Indian counterpart. Despite the notion of a genetic predisposition to criminal behaviour, the English legislation encompassed only those already convicted of a crime, and never their children. It involved, that is, the identification of individuals, not the proscription of defined 'tribes'. Even the assertion that criminal behaviour was 'racially' grounded was far removed from the stigmatizing of everyone in a 'racial' group as a criminal. Despite the superficial similarity of the two enactments, the Indian Criminal Tribes act marked out a distinctively colonial ethnography. Even India's criminals were not similar to England's.

Incongruous though it might appear, the 1871 act included among the 'dangerous' classes not only the so-called criminal tribes, but eunuchs as well. James Fitzjames Stephen, as Law Member drafting the act, insisted that there existed 'an organized system of sodomitical prostitution, of which these wretches are the managers', and that no measure to force them to adopt 'honest pursuits' would be too severe. Although the subsequent discussion on the bill evoked much righteous indignation with regard to the eunuchs' alleged kidnapping and castration of children, what clearly disturbed the government as much is criminal behaviour, and what the act forbade was the practice of eunuchs appearing in public dressed in female attire. Everyone, so the act implied, had not only to adopt a settled livelihood, but to conform to accepted gender roles. Sexual ambiguity could no more be tolerated than a life of 'wandering without leave'.¹¹

Far more consequential were India's 'martial races'. Although these

groups never achieved full statutory definition, in the years after the Mutiny a perceived sense of a distinctive martial fitness came to distinguish various peoples of northern India from those elsewhere, above all in Bengal. This process was driven by the imperatives of the military, who sought an army organized 'with a view to the full development of race efficiency'. Inbred martial skill, as G.F. MacMunn wrote in his definitive study of India's armies, defined one of the 'essential differences between the East and the West'. In the 'East' only certain clans and classes can bear arms; the others have not the physical courage necessary for the warrior's. In Europe, by contrast, 'every able-bodied man, given food and arms, is a fighting man of some sort', and hence capable of serving his country in time of war.¹²

Initially, as Clive and his successors recruited an army for the East India Company, considerations of racial ability mattered little. Many regiments, especially in the southern armies, accepted all recruits and intermixed them without concern for caste or religion. The Bengal Army after 1800 in large part confined its recruitment to the higher castes, above all Brahmins and Rajputs, whose customs the British took care to conserve, and it drew the bulk of its soldiery from rural Oudh and Bihar. Though the upper castes, regarded as generally superior within Indian society, might be presumed to be better soldiers, and though 'a fine physique and martial appearance' might gain an individual the attention of the recruiting officers, no attempt was made to portray the men of these castes or regions as inherently better suited than others for military service.

After 1857 the mutinous Bengal regiments were disbanded, and the recruiting grounds shifted to the north, to the area from Delhi across the Punjab to the frontier. Simultaneously, mixed regiments were largely abandoned in favour of those organized on a systematic grouping of men by 'race and sect and clan'. This transformation was not the result of any historical experience, apart from the Mutiny itself, nor was it wholly a matter of tactical considerations of 'divide and rule'. Madrasis, Marathas, and the sepoy of the Bengal Army had fought well, both for the Company and against it, over the preceding half century; and even during the upheaval of 1857 the mixed regiments of the southern armies had remained loyal. As a result, following the recommendations of the Peel Commission in 1859, many officers argued for a mixture of castes within units in order to avert exclusive

combinations that might once again lead to mutiny. Yet so compelling was the logic of 'martial races' that by the 1880s almost the entire army was organized into units based on caste or ethnicity.

The notion of 'martial races' drew sustenance from a variety of elements in the cultural baggage of late Victorian England. As the Aryans had once conquered northern India, it was assumed that those races descended from them possessed superior military capabilities. The Dogras, isolated in the hills, for instance, were presumed to retain the 'old Aryan Hindu stock'. Other groups, such as the Afridis, with those cropped fair hair and blue eyes of a 'distinctly European appearance', could well, so MacMunn reasoned, have kept intact 'traces' of Alexander's Greek soldiers. Where race failed—for MacMunn acknowledged that most 'martial' groups had lost their distinguishing racial characteristics—environment supplied an alternate explanation. Their 'hardy, active, and alert life' in a land of cold winters and often rugged mountains had 'inured' these northern peoples to hardship and thus fitted them for military life. A presumed camaraderie along the frontier, which we shall soon discuss more fully, also mattered. As MacMunn wrote of the Pathans, 'to the best type of Englishman their open irresponsible manner and delight in all exercise and sport, with their constant high spirits, appeal greatly.' Whether defined by race, climate, or personality, 'martial races' were those who most closely resembled what the British imagined themselves to be. In similar fashion, 'martial races' existed in contrast to the Bengalis. Indeed, one might argue, the 'extraordinary effeminacy' of the Bengali, whom 'no necessity would induce to fight', alone gave meaning to the notion of 'martial races'. They were what the Bengali was not.¹³

In keeping with the larger principles informing the British idea of the caste system, each 'martial' race was conceived of as possessing its own distinctive set of characteristics—Jats, for instance, were 'proverbially thick in the uptake, but have served with distinction'—and these traits were all meticulously detailed in the various regimental recruiting handbooks. One group, however, that of the Sikhs, was not merely enrolled in the list of 'martial races', but came to predominate in the army, and in the process found their community transformed. As Richard Fox has made clear in his study of the 'Lions of the Punjab', the British, from the very outset, determined that only 'pure' Sikhs should be recruited. The British 'laboured hard to ensure the

religious conformity of the Sikh recruit', and not just to any version of Sikhism, but to what the British conceived was proper Sikh belief and practice. Potential recruits had to be baptised into the Sikh faith, while regimental commanders insisted upon a strict observance of those customs associated with reformed monotheistic Sikhism, among them unshorn hair, the wearing of the dagger and steel bangle, and taking the name of 'Singh', or lion. As MacMunn acknowledged, it was the 'British officer who has kept Sikhism up to its old [*sic*] standard.'

By distinguishing a select group of Sikhs in this way, the British believed they could keep Sikhism free of contamination by 'unorthodox' forms of Sikh belief and, more generally, by Hinduism. Sikhism, after all, as they saw it, was a religion distinct from Hinduism, and, as a monotheistic faith, superior. Hence, as one official wrote, 'with the relapse into Hinduism and readoption of its superstitious and vicious social customs, it is notorious that the Sikh loses much of his martial instincts and greatly deteriorates as a fighting soldier.' This 'colonially constituted Sikhism', as Fox describes it, was ostensibly marked out by religious belief, for in principle anyone could be baptised. Yet in practice it embodied British racial ideas as well. Only 'true' Sikhs, men of proper 'stock', which usually meant those of certain prescribed regions and classes, possessed the necessary martial skills; others, of lower-class background or recent conversion to the faith, were of inferior or 'deteriorated' stock, and so, with a few exceptions, such as the Mazhbis, were not recruited into the army. As the British endeavoured to put their ideology into practice, in the army as elsewhere the categories by which Indian society was ordered inevitably became confused.¹⁴

The British did not view Indian society only through the prism of race and caste. Descent, or 'tribal' affiliation, mattered as well. For the most part such genealogical connections were important insofar as they facilitated the resolution of disputes over landholding and inheritance among individual families. Settlement officers, and the courts, needed to know the principles by which estates were to be apportioned among heirs or princely thrones awarded to claimants. In the Punjab, however, the British made kinship the organizing principle of the entire society. This reflected, in part, their perception that in a province with a Muslim majority, 'caste', as an inherently Hindu phenomenon, could not by its very nature appropriately

order rural society. In part, too, the constitution of Punjabi society on a unique basis was a logical continuation of the 'Punjab school' style of governance, based on direct and personal rule, and with it the use of local customary law, rather than the Bengal regulations, with their Sanskritic uniformities, for the adjudication of disputes. This determination to rule, so far as possible, in accordance with indigenous principles gained further strength from the unsettling experience of the 1857 rising, from which the Punjab had for the most part been exempt. Many officials, indeed, attributed this fortuitous escape from rebellion to the province's unique system of rule. As the British in the 1860s and 1870s studied the organization of Punjab society, the 'native institution' they found at its heart, as C.L. Tupper argued, while preparing his compendium of 'Punjab Customary Law', was the 'tribe', which he defined as a patrilineal descent group encompassing those who preserved the memory of a common ancestor. The British set out accordingly to define and systematize this 'tribal system', and so build it into their own imperial order. In so doing, so they believed, they could not only present themselves as legitimate indigenous rulers, presiding over an unaltered 'traditional' society, but they could also harness the Punjab's distinctive social forms, above all in the settlement of canal colonies, to the creation of a prosperous land.

Much in this endeavour involved an effort at self-delusion, for tradition, once systematized and enforced as 'tradition' in the courts, defined a new mode of governance far different from that which had gone before. Furthermore, even though the notion of a 'tribally' based Punjab was self-consciously grounded in British perceptions of local practice, it did not wholly accord with the social realities it purported to describe. Structures of descent varied across the face of the Punjab, as they did elsewhere; while few of the so-called 'tribes', especially in the central and eastern Punjab, had managed to preserve recognized traditions of leadership in the face of hostile Mughal and Sikh rulers. As a result, to provide an institutional footing for local leadership the British created the administrative unit of the *zail*, a grouping of five to forty villages found only in the Punjab. *Zaildars*, as heads of these local units, were meant to be simply existing leaders of locally dominant 'tribes' and 'clans', but in practice they were often created as the British sought to make Punjab society resemble the ideology that informed their conception of it. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, building

upon existing patterns of contiguous settlement, grounded in bonds of solidarity among local kin groups, and reinforcing them where necessary by institutional means, the British had successfully brought into being a rural elite whose influence, as David Gilmartin argues, 'was tied to the "ideology" of imperial authority on which the British had built their regime.'¹⁵

The final stage in the creation of a distinctive 'tribal' Punjab took place with the creation of the category of 'agricultural tribes' in the Land Alienation Act of 1900. The problem of land alienation, or, more precisely, the sale of land for debts owed to moneylenders, perceived as 'outsiders' in village society, had long concerned the British, in the Deccan and the Gangetic valley as well as in the Punjab. Though recent research has brought into question the scale and character of such transfers, their existence forced upon the British at the time an agonizing choice between, on the one hand, the 'modernizing' ideology of an India transformed by the free working of natural economic laws, which encouraged the transfer of property from the hands of 'unenterprising' owners, and, on the other, the ideal of a stable agrarian order kept in place by 'traditional' elites. In the Punjab there was little dissent from the notion that this strategic border province and recruiting ground for the army had to be preserved from agrarian upheaval. Hence, in a far-reaching assault on the privileges of those whom they saw as outsiders, the British prohibited the sale of land to anyone other than a member of a registered 'agricultural tribe'.

With the passage of the Land Alienation Act the British transformed the 'tribal' structure they had built up during the previous half-century. Grouped together into a single unit for the entire province, the 'agricultural tribes', as Gilmartin has pointed out, denoted no social reality, as each did to some degree in its own locality, but only a category which the British used to define who would have the right to own land, and hence the right to wield power within the colonial order. Despite its highly artificial character, however, the notion of 'agricultural tribes' soon took on a life of its own. Under the banner of the Land Alienation Act the province's rural elite, in cooperation with the British, successfully controlled Punjab politics throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Both the organization of the Unionist Party and the Punjabi response to Muslim nationalism before 1947, and even afterwards in Pakistan, demonstrated the enduring

power of the ideology of a 'tribal' Punjab. No more than that of 'caste' could the notion of 'tribe' be contained within the colonial ideology that had originally shaped it.

Shaping Communities

Richard Westmacott's 1830 statue of Warren Hastings, now in the Victoria Memorial, shows him accompanied by two Indians, who flank him on either side, but stand well below the toga-clad imperial ruler. One of the flanking figures, a tall, classically proportioned Brahmin with a shaven head and topknot, represented Hinduism; the other, a seated *munshi* or scribe, bearded and turbaned, and gazing thoughtfully at a book, was meant to stand for India's Muslim peoples. Both figures, garbed as scholars, were treated respectfully, and so reflected Hastings' sympathetic view of India's culture and its religious traditions. Yet they also announced what was to be Britain's enduring insistence that India was divided into two religious communities—those of Hinduism and of Islam.¹⁶

Division of India's people into Hindu and Muslim was not of course new in Hastings' time. The earliest British travellers even in Mughal times had been struck by the distinctive characteristics of the adherents of what they then called the 'Gentoo' faith. As Ralph Fitch, Queen Elizabeth's emissary to the emperor Akbar in 1584, wrote of the Hindus, 'They be the greatest idolators that I ever sawe.' Nor was his perception at all sympathetic; the idols, he declared, were 'blacke and evill favoured, their mouthes monstrous, their eares gilded, and full of jewels.' Such perceptions went back even further in time, to Marco Polo, who toured southern India, and to Alberuni and the medieval Muslim conquerors, as they contemplated the difference between themselves and those over whom they ruled. Yet the term 'Hindu', though of Perso-Arabic origin, was not used in Muslim texts to mark out a religion, but rather referred generally to the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, the lands across the Indus river. Even when the term 'Hindu' was used to set off those adhering to a non-Islamic faith, the perception each group had of the other, as Romila Thapar has written, 'was not in terms of a monolithic religion, but more in terms of distinct and disparate castes and sects along a social continuum.' From the Indian, or Hindu, side, the Central Asian invaders were

demonized, but, Sheldon Pollock has pointed out, as incarnations of the evil Ravana, or as Turks, not as Muslims.¹⁷

Only with the coming of British rule, from the late eighteenth century on, did the notion that there existed distinct 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' communities in India take on a fixed shape. In part this was simply a product of administrative convenience, as the British sought to devise comprehensive systems of law that would at once respect the customs of their new subjects and yet reduce them to a manageable order. It is altogether appropriate that Hastings, who set on foot the codification of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' law, should be commemorated by a statue showing him with a Brahmin pandit and a Muslim munshi. Yet from the outset distinctions of religion were seen as shaping those of character. Dow and Orme, as we have seen, had defined the basic differences demarcating the two religious groupings: Muslims were violent, despotic, masculine; Hindus were indolent, passive, effeminate. One fought by the sword; the other by cunning and litigation. However much William Jones and James Mill may have disagreed in evaluating the accomplishments of India's peoples, together they accepted without question their division into Hindu and Muslim. By the early nineteenth century authoritative conceptions of the two faiths, and the character of their adherents, had been set firmly in place.

More importantly, the British came to believe that adherence to one or the other of these two religions was not merely a matter of belief, but defined membership more generally in a larger community. To be Hindu or Muslim by itself explained much of the way Indians acted. Riotous behaviour, for instance, no matter what its actual character, as Gyanendra Pandey has made clear in his account of British reportage on riots in Banares, was often made to express enduring antagonisms between two opposed and self-contained communities.¹⁸ In early-nineteenth-century Britain too, of course, religious affiliation mattered intensely. Anglicans, Dissenters, and Catholics, from the time of the Reformation onward, had been set apart from each other by Sabbath observance, attitudes to liquor, marriage networks, and education, with each community maintaining its own school. Until well into the nineteenth century the state awarded the right to vote on the basis of religious affiliation, and even the 1870 act, which committed the state to support of education, authorized only the disbursal of funds

to religious bodies. Yet, however much religion may have informed British life, it was never imagined, apart from the exceptional case of Ireland, as having the power to shape the entire society into opposed 'communities'. Symptomatic perhaps of the difference was the prominence given to religious affiliation as a 'fundamental category' in the Indian census, while in Britain the census, apart from one survey in 1851, never recorded data on religion. The centrality of religious community, along with that of caste, for the British marked out India's distinctive status as a fundamentally different land.

British 'understanding' of Hinduism, unlike that of Islam, developed only with the discoveries of the Oriental scholars in the late eighteenth century. Whereas Europeans had since medieval times created a rich descriptive tradition for Islam, perceived as an enemy and an alternate religious system known from bitter experience, Hinduism long remained obscure, a mysterious faith of 'idols' and 'monstrosities'. Furthermore, as the British scrambled to understand Hinduism, they created for that religious system a degree of coherence that it had not possessed before. Indeed, one might almost say, by imposing their 'knowledge' upon it, the British made of Hinduism, previously a loosely integrated collection of sects, something resembling a religion—although, as they saw it, a religion that was not a 'proper' religion. To the present day, scholars of religion still remain at odds over the extent to which the Hinduism of pre-colonial India can be described as a 'religion', with an orthodoxy that defines the faith of a set of believers, as distinct from a set of beliefs and practices embedded in India's larger social order.

Initially, the British sought an organizing principle for Hinduism in the Brahmin community. As the highest caste, as priests, and, in Jones's time, as collaborators in the study of the ancient Sanskrit texts, Brahmins were naturally perceived as the focal point of the faith, and with it of the Hindu community. Ever since Fitch's time commentators had singled out for notice the habits and customs of the Brahmins, whether their wearing of the sacred thread or, as Fitch announced, that they 'eat no flesh, nor kill any thing; they live of rice, butter, milke, and fruits.' For James Mill, the Brahmins, creators of the caste system, were a primary cause of the country's 'degradation'. 'By a system of priestcraft', he wrote, 'built upon the most enormous and tormenting superstition that ever harassed and degraded any portion of mankind',

the minds of the Hindus 'were enchained more intolerably than their bodies'. In all such descriptions of Hinduism, Victorian commentators, steeped in Protestantism, turned inevitably to Catholicism, with its practices ranging from 'popery' to saint worship, as providing a European parallel, and an appropriate vocabulary through which the Hindu faith might be understood.

As time went on Europeans extended and refined their knowledge of the texts that embodied the Hindu faith. Much of this was the work of German Indological scholars, from the philosopher Hegel and the Romantic idealist Friedrich Schlegel to the Sanskritist Max Müller. Together these men fitted India's ancient philosophical texts into a larger vision in which, as Ronald Inden has indicated, Mill's 'more or less disconnected examples of Hindu irrationality and superstition' gave way to a view of Hinduism as a system of 'dream-like knowledge' dominated by a 'creative imagination'. These German scholars did not, of course, construct their philosophical systems with the aim of advancing the administrative objectives of the Raj. Nevertheless, as their worldview made of the Indian mind, 'imaginative and passionate', a foil for Christian and Western 'rationality', it necessarily carried with it the assumption that the Hindus, unable to supply this element themselves, required an externally imposed 'rationality' to order their day-to-day lives. Hence, Germanic Indology, though never directly a part of the ideology of the Raj, by creating a coherent vision of the 'Hindu mind' that at once incorporated it into a larger ordering of the world and yet subordinated it to the West, played a critical role in sustaining the intellectual assumptions that bulwarked Britain's Indian Empire. The vision of a 'spiritual' India, in contrast to a 'materialist' West, was never incompatible with the existence of the Raj.¹⁹

Simultaneously, during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the British in India endeavoured to come to terms with the variety of Hindu religious experience they were encountering on the ground. The attempt to comprehend contemporary Hinduism was, however, a frustrating enterprise. Alfred Lyall, one of the more careful students of Indian religion in the government, came close to throwing up his hands in despair. We can scarcely comprehend, he wrote, 'an ancient religion, still alive and powerful, which is a mere troubled sea, without shore or visible horizon, driven to and fro by the winds of boundless

credulity and grotesque invention.' The range and diversity of worship, with beliefs undergoing 'constant changes of shape and colour' within an 'extraordinary fecundity of superstitious sentiment', made Hindu India, in his view, unlike anywhere else in the world.²⁰

The British sought to make sense of this 'religious chaos' in two ways. First, rather like Maine's account of the village community, the British saw in Hinduism a 'survival' of the ancient world. Even Mill had argued that, 'by conversing with the Hindus of the present day, we, in some measure, converse with the Chaldeans and Babylonians of the time of Cyrus; with the Persians and Egyptians of the time of Alexander.' For Lyall the popular Hinduism of his day was very similar to the polytheism of the Roman Empire. Indeed, he wrote, 'We perceive more clearly what classic polytheism was by realizing what Hinduism actually is.' The second strategy was to insist upon the centrality of 'Brahmanism' as the historic core of the Hindu faith, and to regard so-called popular, or devotional, Hinduism as a 'whole vegetation of cognate beliefs sprouting up in every stage of growth beneath the shadow of the great orthodox traditions and allegories of Brahmanism.'

But why had Hinduism not progressed beyond ancient polytheism to a 'true' monotheism? To some extent, men like Lyall found an answer in the absence of a central ecclesiastical structure capable of disciplining popular practice. But for a larger explanation the British turned to Aryan racial theory. Popular Hinduism, in this view, was the inevitable outcome of the settling of the Aryan invader in a tropical land, where his 'pure' faith became mixed with the fertility cults and superstitions of the subcontinent's aboriginal peoples. Contemporary Hinduism was, as the Sanskrit scholar Monier-Williams described it, using the metaphor of the jungle, 'Brahminism has run to seed and spread out into a confused tangle of divine personalities and incarnations. The one system is the rank and luxuriant outcome of the other.' Lyall in similar terms compared religious practice in India to the 'entangled confusion of a primeval forest, where one sees trees of all kinds, ages, and sizes interlacing and contending with each other.' Above the tree tops a 'glimpse of blue sky' symbolized the 'illimitable transcendental ideas' of Brahmanic speculation above and apart from earth-born conceptions. India's essential Dravidianism, its 'femininity', and its popular Hinduism, were all the same and interchangeable; and together debarred forever any recovery of its former Aryan self.²¹

Such attempts at ordering Hinduism achieved only a partial success. Even Lyall's detailed account of the 'religion of an Indian province', that of Berar, where he had served in the 1860s, though it served as a model for subsequent studies of popular Hinduism, did little more than catalogue some eleven modes of religious practice, ranging from the worship of stones and animals to that of deceased persons and local heroes. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with the Brahmins as collaborators, and the ancient texts to guide them, the British, and subsequently the German Indologists, had constructed a coherent notion of Hinduism, and of a Hindu community, that took shape in the codes of Hindu personal law. A century later, their knowledge of Hinduism no longer confined to a tidy set of texts, the British instead found themselves confronted with Lyall's 'tangled jungle of disorderly superstitions'. In such circumstances, to deploy the term 'Hindu', even as an overarching category, was always difficult. The decennial censuses, which from 1881 onward marshalled the members of India's religions into 'communities', mapped, counted, and above all, as Kenneth Jones has noted, compared each with its rivals. Yet, even so, the category 'Hindu' remained exceptionally elusive. As the Punjab census commissioner reported in 1881, 'Every native who was unable to define his creed, or who described it by any other name than that of some recognized religion . . . was held to be and classed as a Hindu.'²²

In many ways it suited British purposes not to press forward too vigorously with the consolidation of Hinduism. The adherence of that faith, after all, a majority of India's population, if accorded an autonomous sense of identity, posed a potentially menacing alternative to the Raj. The British thus turned instead to local custom and caste as more useful categories through which to make sense of Indian society. Though the codes of Hindu law still embodied the ideology of Hastings' time, more localized identities informed much of legal and administrative practice outside Bengal. This process was perhaps most visibly manifested in the recording and codification of Punjab customary law. Here overarching religious identities, whether of Hinduism or Islam, as we have seen, were set aside in favour of principles drawn from the secular ordering of kin and clan. Caste, in particular, was convenient, for it afforded (or so the British thought) a precise way of knowing, and so controlling, Indian society at the local level, and it could be seen in any case as incorporating much

that was distinctive about Hinduism. With the rare exception of such reformist groups as the Brahmo and Arya Samaj, seen as hopeful portents of a 'purer' faith, the late-nineteenth-century ethnographic enterprise was based upon caste, rather than sect. In many reports and statistical tables a commonly used heading was 'Caste if Hindu, otherwise religion'. The shaping of a compelling sense of 'Hindu' identity was to be a product only of the twentieth century, and the work of Hindus themselves.

Islam, by contrast, possessed for the British (if not always for its adherents) an established coherence. The long and intimate connections of Islam with Europe, from the time of the Crusades onward, had provided Europeans with an assured sense of 'knowing' Islam, and Muslims, that did not exist as they endeavoured to understand Hindus and Hinduism. As James Mill noted, 'With the state of civilization in Persia the instructed part of European readers are pretty familiar.' This contrasted sharply with the 'mysterious, and little known' state of civilization among the Hindus. One might argue that in India two different Orientalist discourses met: one derived from the European encounter with the Muslim Middle East, the other an attempt to describe distant Asian lands where a tropical climate shaped passive and effeminate peoples. Insofar as India's pre-colonial states were frequently constituted as Islamic polities, and Muslims provided the dominant elite within them, it was easy to project the stereotypes constructed in the Middle East upon India's Muslims. In so doing, Muslims were inevitably distinguished sharply from their Hindu neighbours, and included within the alternate set of Orientalist notions of the 'East'. Shaped by these two contrasting discourses, the two communities found themselves counterposed, at first imaginatively and then in the strife of 'communalism', one against the other.²³

Notes

1. Bernard Cohn, 'Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture', in Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn (eds), *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 3–25, especially pp. 15–16; Nicholas B. Dirks, 'Castes of Mind', *Representations*, no. 37 (Winter 1992), pp. 16–78; and idem, 'Colonial Histories and Native Informants', in Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 279–310.

2. Christopher Pinney, 'Classification and Fantasy in the Photographic Construction of Caste and Tribe', *Visual Anthropology*, vol. I (1990), pp. 259–88; and C.A. Bayly (ed.), *The Raj: India and the British 1600–1947* (London, 1990), pp. 254–5; see also the correspondence in National Archives of India (NAI) For. Dept. Part A, June 1861, nos. 278–9, and Home General A, December 1861, nos. 43–5.
3. G.F.I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan* (1885; reprinted, Karachi, 1974), p. 129; and David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 4–6.
4. Risley, *People of India*, p. 278.
5. Ibid., pp. 25–9; for William Crooke's criticism of Risley's views, see his introduction to the second edition, pp. xvi–xxii, and his own *Tribes and Castes of the Northwest Provinces and Oudh*, 4 vols (Calcutta, 1896).
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12. G.F. MacMunn, *The Armies of India* (London, 1911), pp. 1, 129.
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14. Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley, 1985), chapter 3, especially pp. 140–52; MacMunn, *Armies*, pp. 133–40.
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22. Kenneth W. Jones, 'Religious Identity and the Indian Census', in Barrier (ed.), *The Census*, pp. 73–101.
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Social Categories and Colonization in Panjab, 1849–1920*

BRIAN P. CATON

Occasional divergences would, of course, have to be provided in dealing with a law affecting diverse tribes and races, as it may be conceded that Voltaire only expresses a commonplace truth when he observes 'that the more vast a State is in size and composed of different peoples, the more difficult it becomes to unite all together by one and the same jurisprudence.' To some extent this remark of the French Historian is applicable to a large Indian Province like the Punjab and I do not deny—in fact, I have fully experienced—the difficulty to which he alludes.¹

Writing in 1880 in the preface of what became the first of several editions of his *Digest of Civil Law in the Punjab*, W.H. Rattigan expressed a point of view familiar to local and provincial administrators yet apparently lost to many discussions carried out at the all-India level. Rattigan, even then a veteran of the relatively young High Court of Lahore, had to administer civil justice based on a set of assumptions about social categories in Panjab derived from the British experience of 1857. Although Orientalists and British administrators by 1858 had conceptualized Indian society

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as fundamentally religious, members of the Punjab Commission believed that Panjabis were measurably different from the rest of India on religious questions; in a draft of the memorandum of record of the disturbances in 1857–8, Richard Temple claimed that ‘the Punjabees are not so ticklish & bigoted about caste & religion as Hindoostanees’.² By the end of the nineteenth century, at least, many British officials had concluded that caste, as enunciated in documents, or by Brahmans from Gangetic India, did not exist in Panjab. Some officials attributed this to Panjabis’ ignorance of or distaste for the sort of legalistic traditions of urbanized Company informants of the eighteenth century.³ However, some officials continued to use the term ‘caste’ in both government and ethnographic texts, most famously Denzil Ibbetson in his 1881 report on the Punjab Census.⁴ While this divergence suggests that the British colonial presence in India was hardly monolithic, more importantly it begs a question about social categories, and caste in particular. Differences among administrators appeared because the social and political conditions in which caste emerged varied across regions, and often within regions. Textual and administrative representations of caste continually changed in response to the widely varying political agenda of highly fragmented British and local populations seeking to maximize their control of property.

The term ‘caste’ has had a lively existence, quite separate from concerns of property. In the British view, reproduced quite clearly in Ibbetson’s treatise, the presence and strength of caste as a system correlated directly with the presence of ‘Brahminical Hinduism’ signified by standard Orientalist clichés regarding ‘irksome’ social restrictions and ‘degraded idolatry’.⁵ Religion had something to do with caste, as Europeans were careful not to deploy ‘caste’ in their descriptions of Muslim social categories in India. However, Ibbetson’s use of the modifier ‘Brahminical’ suggests a more inclusive definition of ‘Hinduism’, and therefore negates a simple congruence of caste and Hinduism. Widespread administrative application of caste to a limited reading of ‘Hinduism’ accompanied a relative profusion of terms to describe social categories outside of ‘caste’, of which ‘tribe’ became the most prominent by the middle of the nineteenth century. Colonial authors, at least in northern and central India, frequently linked the evolutionary ‘primitiveness’ of tribes to their physical distance from settled societies or to their spatial mobility.⁶ In the administrative

discourse of the nineteenth century, the distinction between caste and tribe signified the breach between settled and unsettled, controlled and uncontrolled, possessing and not possessing property in land. In Panjab, as the provincial government struggled to extend its control over uncultivated territory and to turn 'loyal' Panjabis into the coercive arm of the state in the rest of India, 'tribe' became a more flexible term: some tribes became officially criminal in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and other tribes became officially agricultural, possessed of property, status, and power. British social engineering programmes in Panjab depended on Panjabis to provide the terms for their operation; Panjabi responsiveness to the material rewards of British programmes produced increasing flexibility in the definition of the social categories administrators sought to define more narrowly, yielding an historically evolving discourse through which Panjabis and government struggled to secure control over property and social order.

Social Categories and Power before Annexation

Obviously some form of social organization predated the British interest in and annexation of Panjab in 1849, and whatever forms scholars can discern appear to have been grounded in genealogy, that is, the notion that blood relations and affinal relations create bonds of loyalty or obligation that regulate the social actions of individuals. Such genealogical forms populate histories across northern India and across multiple chronological periods. For ancient India Romila Thapar has applied the term 'lineage group' to describe 'a corporate group of unilineal kin with a formalized system of authority'.⁷ While one could contest the degree of formality of a lineage group's 'system of authority' or question the existence of actual kin relations among lineage group members, the language of genealogy remained central to social reckoning. For Thapar's 'lineage groups', authority emerged from the construction of genealogies, normally composed of two parts. The 'fixed tradition' consisted of succession lists or lists of descent groups; it was perhaps only slightly more consistent over time than the 'narrative tradition', which consisted of legends or incidents in the lives of the major figures in the genealogy.⁸ Sanskritic genealogies usually reached back to the sun or moon, providing the

divine legitimation rulers habitually sought. Genealogical links could be telescoped legitimately in order to abridge uncertainties and to legitimize de facto exertion of power. This flexibility of genealogical claims to legitimize rule continued through the medieval period of Indian history, particularly in the notion of 'Rajputhood' that became most popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Dirk Kolff has contended that "Afghan" as well as "Rajput" were soldiers' identities' rather than ethnic or genealogical designations.⁹ Kolff's usage of 'genealogical' here implied the existence of actual bloodlines, meaning soldiers from any sort of family could make a genealogical claim to a putative Afghan or Rajput ancestor without much challenge. Rulers made claims of right to rule with little difficulty, but they waged a constant struggle to actually exercise rule and thereby maintain social status. In addition to engaging in an economy of public consumption (*dana*), a broker of military labour, that is, a lineage head, proclaimed his status as a 'Rajput' by engaging in a series of matrimonial alliances with families both more and less powerful than he.¹⁰ This model of legitimizing behaviour comes quite close to David Gilmartin's view of the colonial-era '*biraderi*' as 'essentially transactional'. In both medieval and colonial cases, leadership may have been formally acknowledged in a '*biraderi* council' or through genealogical maps, but formal recognition was not required as long as the transactions of rule successfully occurred.¹¹ Lineages maintained their relevance as modes of social organization and political legitimation precisely because of their flexibility. Scholars cannot read a premodern genealogical claim at face value, but they equally must keep in mind that at specific points in time some people believed these claims to be statements of fact. The more powerful a ruler was on the ground, the more likely was his genealogical claim to be believed.

The relationship between the exertion of power and textual claims of right to rule must colour analyses of Panjab on the eve of British annexation, and particularly of the two terms *misl* and *qaum*, which appear most frequently in descriptions of social categories of this period. In English language texts, the term *misl* appeared first in late-eighteenth-century travelogues and nineteenth-century histories of the rise of Ranjit Singh, ruler of Lahore from 1799 to 1839. The social formation that *misl* described emerged only in the context of local resistance to the last expeditions of Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1760,

and accordingly the term does not appear with its social connotation in Panjabi texts before that date. The English accounts describe *misl* as political formations in which members were 'equal' partners, and as having been a natural extension of Sikh egalitarianism; a noteworthy exception appeared in W.G. Osborne's narration of resistance to Ahmad Shah Durrani's expeditions in the 1750s: 'The Sikh *chiefs* had been followed to the field by *relations* or volunteers, and not by hired retainers; they considered themselves as partners or associates in each separate enterprise, and regarded the lands acquired as common property, in which each had a share according to the degree in which he had contributed to the acquisition . . .'¹² More modern scholarship has only begun to challenge the Sikh egalitarian meaning of *misl* established in the nineteenth century. J.S. Grewal, in his contribution to the *New Cambridge History of India*, asserted cryptically that 'the ties of kinship among other things' became the basis for the formation of *misl*.¹³ Veena Sachdeva argued that the term *misl* had no consistent usage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that *misl*s could not be treated as cohesive political units in the way that narratives of Sikh history have done to date. Sachdeva's close examination of the Bhangi *misl* illustrated the ephemeral and voluntary character of political associations in the eighteenth century, and her treatment of the Nakkai *misl* is particularly telling. The Nakkais were actually two families, based in the towns of Gugera and Bharwal, who appear never to have cooperated for political ends and in fact often fought against each other; the term 'Nakkai' appears simply to refer to the region (Nakka) in which these two families operated.¹⁴ The point to be drawn from Sachdeva's work is that a group of people, usually Sikh, may or may not have deployed a *misl* name to describe their operative group in order to justify or legitimize a particular action of that group. In other words, a *misl* was normally a temporary combination of corroborated claims of descent, for example that Ranjit Singh was a son of Maha Singh, and of inter-family alliance, as in Ranjit Singh's Sukarchakia *misl* or the so-called Phulkian *misl* which constituted the princely families under the protection of the East India Company between 1809 and 1849. However, the ephemeral nature of the term's contemporary use and Ranjit Singh's elimination of the *misl*s should not weaken the social relevance of the term to the people of northern and eastern Panjab in the eighteenth century; the rule of Ranjit Singh

and the events culminating in annexation required Panjabis to deploy other more useful social categories.

The second term, *qaum*, while having a much longer lifespan than *misl*, has proven more flexible in its application. Dictionary compilers of the turn of the twentieth century clearly identified the term's Arabic origins, but in dictionaries of both Persian and Urdu *qaum* and its plural, *aqwam*, include 'caste' or 'castes' among the wide variety of English glosses: people, nation, tribe, family, race.¹⁵ Certainly, these dictionary entries are products of their time rather than inputs; they follow, almost word for word, the efforts of Census Bureau officials to come to grips with indigenous terminology for social categories, as discussed below. Examining the contextual usage of *qaum* more clearly illuminates earlier usages, and for south-western Panjab the most useful text is *Tarikh-e-Jhang Sial*.¹⁶ George Hamilton, while serving as Deputy Commissioner of Jhang District in the 1850s, commissioned this work, with which he intended to provide some insight into the political organization of the men who were the primary power brokers in his district. The author, Maulvi Nur Sial, focused on the succession of 'true' (*riyasat*) of his own genealogical thread (the Jalalkhanana) over Jhang District from its centre of power, Jhang town. Nur Sial's elision of 'Jalalkhanana' and 'Sial' raises some concerns about the reliability of the text given its contemporary agenda; however, the inclusion of expansive, albeit incomplete, genealogical trees (*naqsha-e-nasabnama*) and attention to stories of origin provide the contextual content for examining the use of *qaum*. The beginning of the text introduces the phrase *qaum-e-Sial*, referring to the family of the patronymic ancestor Rai Sial, who purportedly migrated from Jaunpur to southwestern Panjab in the thirteenth century. Rai Sial had three sons, Bharmi, Kohli, and Mahni, whose descendants appear in the text as, in the first of the three cases, *qaum-e-Bharmi* or, more frequently, *aqwam-e-Bharmi*, referring to the large number of genealogical groups linked to this ancestor. Each of the *aqwam-e-Bharmi*, to follow our example, had its own patronymic ancestor, usually located between the eighth and thirteenth generation removed from Rai Sial. The names of these *aqwam-e-Bharmi* were generated from the addition of the suffix 'ana' to the name of the later ancestor; for example, the descendants of Fattu were called Fattuana, from Mukhta Mukhtiana, from Raja Rajana, and so on; yielding well over a hundred *aqwam* linked to Rai Sial.¹⁷

The text then suggests at least three uses of *qaum*: first, the largest possible genealogical unit, 'Sial'; second, a smaller genealogical unit, much greater in number, and with more immediate political relevance; and third, the three groups of *aqwam* attached to the three sons of Rai Sial. The narrative of the Jalalkhananas as presented in the text shows how factions could develop along sibling or agnatic lines, although these factions were rarely if ever called *aqwami*. The term *qaum* could describe many, but not all, of the units of political organization that appeared surreptitiously in south-western Panjab in at least the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries, if not earlier.

Examining the case of a single *qaum* illustrates more clearly the relationship between local and regional power and begins to expose the changes brought about through the colonization process. The Kharal *qaum* organized themselves into two groups of families, Upera and Lakhera, of animal herders operating in the lower Bari Doab; they frequently clashed with each other and with their neighbours, the Sikh Nakkai families. Sources discussing Kharals in detail put the number of subdivisions of the two groups between two and five, none of which appear to have cooperated for political ends.¹⁸ The more important group politically were the Lakheras, primarily because of their maintenance of control over the town of Kamalia, named after a fourteenth-century Lakhera Khan, and its hinterland. Kamalia was an important commercial centre for grain harvested in the lower Ravi valley, and also served as a stopping place for long-distance trade passing between Jhang and Pakpattan. During the rule of Ranjit Singh the Nakkai Sikhs seriously weakened the power of the Lakheras in the lower Ravi valley, and it should not be so surprising to find that in October 1847 the head of the Lakheras, Sarfaraz Khan, rode as far as Pindi Bhattian to meet A.H. Cocks, the representative of the Resident at Lahore who was scheduled to make the first British observations of villages in the lower Ravi in January 1848.¹⁹ Under British rule Sarfaraz Khan became a fairly substantial landowner, in some cases graciously consenting to pay the revenue of villages which would not agree to the settlement officer's contract.²⁰ By the time the lower Chenab Canal reached the vicinity of Kamalia, the Lakheras were almost entirely landowners and therefore had access to canal colony land. The Uperas, on the other hand, had chosen to maintain residences in the *bar* and to not extend the boundaries of their

'property' at settlement; more property meant payment of more land revenue and responsibility for tracking stolen cattle in a greater area. Therefore, when the canal opened in the 1890s, government granted Uperas land as *janglis*, a status which became profitable only after the Uperas had proven themselves to be frugal and efficient cultivators (as discussed below).²¹ The Kharal case illustrates two key points. By acting ordinarily in the role of the head of a 'ruling lineage', or to use Nur Sial's term, as a *ra'is*, Sarfaraz Khan negotiated for himself, and by extension for his lineage, a secure place in the regional accumulation of political micro-processes that we call British rule in Panjab. Also, the crucial micro-processes were those that transformed Sarfaraz Khan from *ra'is* to landlord.

The social groups represented by the terms *misl* and *qaum* exercised a certain degree of power at the local level, but in the early nineteenth century they operated, perhaps not for the first time, under the shadow of a larger political presence. As referred to earlier, Ranjit Singh coopted (as in the case of Fateh Singh Ahluwalia) or destroyed (as in the case of the Bhangis) the *misdars* and lineage heads who could have challenged his legitimacy as ruler in the north of Panjab. In the south, where the population were less competitors than potential subjects, cooptation was unnecessary as long as lineage heads paid their 'taxes', which often amounted to an irregularly collected payment. For the local notable, the payment of revenue meant a temporary reprieve from Ranjit Singh's demands for cash; for Ranjit Singh, the payment indicated submission to the throne. For example, court reports from Lahore referred to Muzaffar Khan, and later Sarfaraz Khan, as the 'Nizam of Multan' when revenue was about to be paid, and as 'Nawab' when Multan exercised independence from Lahore.²² Ahmad Khan Sial of Jhang (of the Jalalkhanana *qaum*) posed an exceptional case. While the notables of northern Panjab appeared regularly at the court of Ranjit Singh, and the Nawabs of Multan, Mankera, and other outlying areas never appeared in person, Ahmad Khan appeared sporadically. Between 1808 and 1815, Ahmad Khan was responsible for paying the revenue of Jhang to Lahore; after 1816, Ranjit Singh awarded the revenue contract to others, usually Lahori subordinates. In 1816 though, Ranjit Singh demanded Rs 100,000 from Ahmad Khan, even though he had formally separated Ahmad Khan from revenue collection, meaning that Ranjit Singh began to view Ahmad

Khan as a military retainer rather than a conquered notable.²³ The ability of these individuals to pay Lahore's demand suggested the local limits of their power, but the nature and frequency of their interaction with the court demonstrated the fluidity of their political subordination. British rule did not change this principle of political fluidity, but it restricted political claims to the local level and in the language of property.

Creating Property and Elites during Colonization

From the beginning of British rule in Panjab, property generated political status. Archival records indicate that in the years immediately following annexation, the hangers-on of the Lahore court, demobilized soldiers, and their successors generated a flood of claims to jagirs and pensions; the quick rulings overwhelmingly denying or diminishing the amounts of these claims proved to Panjabis that mere association with the court or service in the military were no longer sufficient to produce political status.²⁴ Instead, John Lawrence, as chief commissioner, intended the social landscape-clearing policies of the 1850s to replace courtly elites with landowning yeomanry and peasantry.²⁵ However, the rebellions of 1857 elicited a dramatic change of policy. As Andrew Major has argued, the British government sought to create a class of notables who were sufficiently elite, and who could ensure 'law and order' while crown rule extended over Panjab.²⁶ The requirement of sufficient nobility led Robert Montgomery, then Lieutenant Governor of Panjab, to commission Lepel Griffin to record the lineage history of those currently befriended by the government, a document which ended up being published as *Punjab Chiefs* in 1865. Griffin's explicit intent was to document 'the Punjab aristocracy as it exists at the present day', including narratives only of those men 'who possess, at the present time, rank, wealth or local influence'. Griffin's volume covered the aristocracy between the Beas and the Indus rivers, and his plan to cover the rest of the province was fulfilled in part with the 1870 publication of *Rajas of the Punjab* and with C.F. Massy's *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab* in 1890. In the same year Massy edited a new edition of *Punjab Chiefs* in which the narratives in the first edition were extended up to the date of publication, rather than entirely revised to account for the changes in families' fortunes

in the intervening quarter century. In 1907 Charles Rivaz ordered W.L. Conran to bring both Griffin's and Massy's work up to date, and H.D. Craik finished this work in 1909 after Conran's illness. However, Conran and Craik did change the lineup of families in the two texts, now integrated into a single work, prompting numerous applications for inclusion in the new edition from families previously undocumented. Conran and Craik evaluated these applications with the assistance of a Committee of the Punjab Chiefs' Association, meaning that the government, by the instrument of demi-official publications, had created an aristocracy which was, in Marx's terms, not merely in itself but for itself.²⁷

While 'Punjab Chiefs' was in the process of unofficially gazetting the uppermost crust of indigenous elite, administrators at the local level used a variety of official methods to construct a network of petty notables and landowners loyal to the colonial state. In the colonial regime, a *ra'is* could invoke not only the language of ownership to exercise control over territory but also the language of lease, specifically the right to engage in rain-fed cultivation on designated plots of government-owned land. The government made such *bar barani* leases usually for one to three years, but often it repeatedly leased the same plots to the same people, creating a de facto ownership that could be revoked at the discretion of government. Malik Machia Langrial, along with Ghulam Muhammad Daulatanna and Ghulam Qadir Khan Khakwani, formed in 1882 what one officer called 'a chain of able and loyal zamindars, stretching down the whole way from Sarai Sidhu to the Sutlej.'²⁸ By 1891, however, the government considered awarding Machia's lease to another lessee and offering as compensation the lease of a different plot of land which could have been converted to title if Machia put it under perennial cultivation.²⁹ Local administrators had cast some doubt on Machia's willingness or ability to check cattle theft in the territory of his lease; such dubious loyalty could not and in the end did not go unpunished.³⁰ But note that the conversion of lease to title, the real measure of power, depended upon cultivation and, implicitly, settlement. Machia's claim to nobility meant little if he was unwilling to participate in the local government's agenda regarding the use of property.

The case of Dhara Singh, of the Gugera Nakkai family, provides another example of status becoming grounded in entitlement. During

the rule of Ranjit Singh, Dhara Singh held in jagir land worth Rs 3250 per annum. He raised a small force against the British army in 1846, and as punishment the British government resumed his jagir and paid him as compensation a pension of Rs 300 per annum.³¹ Dhara Singh personally attended the Deputy Commissioner of Gugera during the Gugera uprising in 1857–8, fighting against many of the insurgents, providing testimony against those apprehended, and aiding the Deputy Commissioner 'materially'.³² Dhara Singh apparently proposed that his service be rewarded with the reassignment of his jagir, but the greater part of his jagir (Rs 3000 of Rs 3200) consisted of the town of Gugera which the British were using as a civil station. The government of course could not approve Dhara Singh's proposal, but they doubled his pension, making it in perpetuity as well, and assigned him title to the two villages that accounted for the Rs 200 remaining of his old jagir. In theory, the rising value of land, especially land under cultivation, in the British property regime would make Dhara Singh and his family moderately wealthy and in high esteem in the eyes of the state.³³

Although the government did transform individuals into land-owners, members of the Punjab Commission believed that the title of an individual was nested in a set of family relationships, especially as the post-1857 push to create a class of loyal notables confronted questions of succession and inheritance. In the United Provinces and in Panjab, British officials under the influence of the teachings of Henry Maine increasingly associated agrarian order with self-contained village communities, and especially with communities run by single lineages.³⁴ C.L. Tupper, the most important compiler of customary law in Panjab, contended that 'communal' or lineage rights would inevitably take precedence over those of an individual or a nuclear family.³⁵ Property in land could not escape the community without endangering its existence and, therefore, the stability of the agrarian economy. In fact, Tupper argued that the British system of law inherently promoted the emergence of individual interest in property, and therefore the British government was obligated to design a legal system in Panjab which promoted communal or joint ownership.³⁶ Formal codification of customary law began in the 1870s, but informal codification in the form of judicial precedent had begun with cases heard by magistrates, district officers, and settlement officers

immediately following annexation. Administrators limited formal codification by geographic as well as lineage boundaries, so that, for example, 'Muhammadan Jats' of the central districts of Panjab were governed by customary law, but those in the western parts of the province could be governed by religious law.³⁷ Formal codification involved an administrator filling out a survey form in the presence of the elders of the lineage group under study. This procedure often raised questions that lineage elders had never considered, and many recorded 'customs' in fact had no precedent.³⁸ Genealogies began to be submitted as evidence in civil cases, and magistrates found themselves having to consider the merits of conflicting genealogies.³⁹ Complaints even challenged the codified customary law, in one case appealing the decision of a local magistrate who had actually written the code at the district's most recent settlement.⁴⁰ Although Panjabis hotly contested the human content of lineages and the rules by which they were governed, the codes and court reporters from the 1880s onward suggest that both British and Panjabis recognized lineages as the foundation of arguments over transmission and mutation of property.

Translating Panjab through the Census

The increasing social and political importance of genealogical groups in the middle of the nineteenth century forced administrators to lay down more precise boundaries between these groups and to explain the nature of these boundaries. To be fair, the government sought to allow Panjabis to identify themselves using their own categories, and this process resulted in the Census of 1881. Two smaller and less detailed censuses in 1855 and 1868 provided crude figures for the government of Panjab. But these two did not distinguish the population beyond the generic religious categories of Hindu, Musalman, Sikh, and Jain, and the government did not plan a regular census to follow 1868. The 1881 census was the first to count all of British India at once, pointedly connecting Panjab to its fellow provinces, but Panjabis remember this census for the report on caste written by the provincial superintendent of the census, Denzil Ibbetson, which has enjoyed numerous reprintings and continues to be the starting point for academic and amateur writings on caste in Panjab.⁴¹

After the profession of ignorance with which apparently all

nineteenth-century administrators were obliged to preface their most positivist writings, Ibbetson provided a summary of the 'currently received theory of caste' and his own alternative. The current theory contended that caste was peculiar to Hinduism, consisted of the four varna categories, and was perpetual and immutable. Ibbetson suggested that caste was a social rather than religious institution, that the varna categories were not universally applicable and hierarchized, and that caste was infinitely variable.⁴² Ibbetson had to revise the 'current theory' in light of the actual census returns, but he could not bring himself to discount completely the validity of the 'current theory'. Because the 'current theory' was grounded in Orientalist interpretation of Sanskritic texts, he presented the two theories as a historical narrative. For Ibbetson, occupation was the historical foundation for caste, as it was the foundation for class in England. In India, occupation became inscribed in religious texts, and ultimately caste as a social order became separated from actual occupations. Conversion to Islam, therefore, had little effect on caste other than detaching it from its religious moorings; in the western and predominantly Muslim districts of Panjab, then, one found the 'tribal type of caste'. And at this point Ibbetson's prose began to unravel:

Here the fiction which unites the caste, race, nation, or whatever you may choose to call it, is that of common descent from a traditional ancestor. In the main it is something more than a fiction, for if the common ancestor be mythical, as he probably is, there is still a very real bond of common origin, common habitat, common customs and modes of thought, and tribal association continued through several centuries, which holds these people together. But even here the stock is not even professedly pure.⁴³

In the ensuing paragraph, Ibbetson chose to call it 'tribe rather than . . . caste', but the short passage cited here enumerated nearly every term and basis for social organization British administrators ever applied to Panjab. Here British expectations of a logical system, based on a limited set of principles and producing regimented sets of mixed or 'pure' groups, clashed with indigenous understandings of lineage which were responsive to fluctuations in political power and economic circumstances. Ibbetson knew enough to comment on the 'mutability of caste', but his quest for a system condemned him to centrifugal prose.

Part of Ibbetson's difficulty with Panjabi social life and ultimately terminology resulted from the limitations of his professional experience. Ibbetson joined the Indian Civil Services (hereafter ICS) in 1870, and his only experience before appointment to the Census was as a Settlement Officer in Karnal District, across the Jamuna River from the United Provinces.⁴⁴ Despite the similarities in social relationships between herding and cultivating families in southeastern and southwestern Panjab, linguistic usages apparently did not correlate in the same way. On the census form, Ibbetson created three columns, in which he wanted enumerators to report 'original caste or tribe', 'clan', and 'got or sept'. Even before the forms were prepared, translation became an issue:

In the east *qaum* is used for religion and *zat* for caste; in the west *qaum* for caste, *jat* for tribe or clan. In the east *got* is the universal word for tribe among the peasantry, insomuch that the Rajputs call their royal races not *kuls* but *gots*; everywhere it is used by Brahmans, Banyas and the like for the Brahminical *gotra*; in the west it is unknown save in the latter sense. As for the local term for smaller tribes or clans they vary almost from district to district and from caste to caste. After consulting Commissioners we translated our headings '*asl qaum*,' '*zat ya firqah*,' '*got ya shakh*.'⁴⁵

It seems that Ibbetson's model for devising the form was the landholding Rajput class of the Gangetic valley, which would have returned rather neatly as 'Rajput', 'Chauhan' and 'Khichi', for example. However, Ibbetson found that use of the word *asl* with *qaum* prompted respondents to provide their most ambitious genealogies, many claiming Mughal, Qureshi, or Rajput descent. In much of Panjab, only two rather than three names were in use, so that in many cases respondents invented, guessed, or consulted Brahmans to fill in the *got* column.⁴⁶ Ibbetson actually chose to quote in his report some of the most damning criticism of his own form, submitted by E.B. Steedman, an ICS officer who had spent his career up to that date in Gujrat, Jhang, and Dera Ismail Khan. Steedman reported that in some cases 'Rajput the "*asl kaum*," sometimes "*Syal*" the clan, and sometimes Chachkana the sept or family, is entered in the first of the three [columns of the form].' Steedman also claimed to know 'exactly what answers an enumerator would get from a representative Sval

zamindar. *Question*—What is your tribe (*kaum*)? *Answer*—Bharwana. *Question*—What is your clan (*zat*)? *Answer*—Syal. *Question*—What is your family (*got* or *shakh*)? *Answer*—God only knows.’ Steedman in the end felt that the form sought more detailed information than the necessary ‘Syal, Ghakkar, and Awan’: I do not think much is gained by working out returns showing the total population of the Bharwana, Chuchkana, Admal, Firozal, and Bugdial families. There are no restrictions on intermarriage between members of the different families.’⁴⁷ Ibbetson rebutted Steedman’s criticisms by referring to the instructions that accompanied the census form, which suggested the second column be left blank if respondents gave only two names; therefore the blame lay in the hands of the enumerators, who demanded that all three columns be filled.

Both Ibbetson and Steedman missed important points. Despite the almost limitless flexibility of the terms ‘Rajput’ and ‘Jat’, Ibbetson insisted that they be recorded as the ‘*asl kaum*’, the most inductive of the three social categories on the census form. Ibbetson clearly attached a different status rank to these two terms, and his work suggests that the ‘*asl kaum*’, of Brahman, Rajput, and Jat, were intended to map onto the varna or ‘caste’ categories of Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. These latter caste categories had perhaps even less meaning for Panjabis than the former categories, but varna categories could be applied across all of British India. Ibbetson created the census form with the intent to produce information accessible to administrators in other parts of British India, and despite the efforts of respondents to prioritise their own names within the linguistic framework of the census form, he rearranged the information in the returns to suit his, and presumably the empire’s, ends.⁴⁸ In an uncharacteristic moment of short-sightedness, Steedman’s closing remark about intermarriage contradicted the earlier portion of his response to Ibbetson. If Steedman’s prediction of the response of the ‘representative Syal zamindar’ were accurate, then the lineage name ‘Bharwana’, and not ‘Syal’, would be the most important social category. In fact, nearly all of what the British knew about the precolonial history of southwestern Panjab, in particular Steedman’s work on the 1880 settlement of Jhang district, suggested that the acrimony between the various lineages of Sials, Kharals, and other ‘castes’ or ‘tribes’ had been a political reality,

and lineage cleavages had a very significant impact on how people in southwestern Panjab adapted to colonial regimes of property and revenue administration.⁴⁹

New Terms and Changing Meanings after the 1881 Census

Negotiations over lineage groups enumerated in the 1881 census remained important, as officers in other departments of government sought to manipulate Panjabi social categories in order to achieve administratively localized ends. The two most important cases are discussed here. First, while the census was underway, officers in the Indian Army began to develop a recruitment policy dependent on what ultimately became known as 'martial races'. In the aftermath of the insurrections of 1857–8, officers had sought ways to reward loyal Indians and to restrict the distribution of arms to Indians thought to be categorically disloyal. The Army began to permit recruitment only to those men deemed to be born into 'martial races', a policy given formal voice by Lord Roberts in 1890.⁵⁰ Such a policy required the army to ascertain and ultimately gazette races as martial or not. It is true that the term used here was 'races' and not 'castes', but the names recorded in recruiting manuals belie the semantic difference. Volumes titled 'Sikhs',⁵¹ 'Punjabi Musulmans', 'Pathans', and 'Jats and Gujars', for example, divided the landscape into recruiting zones, usually employing district boundaries, and drew up lists of 'clans' found in each zone. The clan names for the most part corresponded to those found under Ibbetson's third column, '*got ya shakh*'. Recruitment manual writers evaluated clans on the basis of physical characteristics, such as height, musculature, and endurance, but more importantly they evaluated mental characteristics as well, such as intelligence, courage, perseverance, pusillanimity, and, above all else, loyalty. Because nearly all of these characteristics cannot be quantified, officers never used data; therefore, evaluations were always relative, either to British soldiers or most frequently to other clans of the same martial race. The process of gazetting martial races did not entail creating new lineage groups; instead the Army created a new category, 'martial race', into which fell a select number of pre-existing social groups more or less fixed by the census. The material privileges

open to martial races meant that Panjabis were keen to achieve and protect their lineages' inclusion, as Richard Fox has shown; Tai Yong Tan's work on the District Soldiers' Boards in the twentieth century has illustrated Panjabis' awareness not only of the relevance of this new social category, but also of the distinct linkage between material wealth and the social status of army service.⁵² Panjabis may not have created the social category of martial races, but they cultivated it in order to distinguish themselves from Indians of other regions and to amplify their status in relation to their local neighbours.

In the second case of creating a new social category, a combination of revenue and political issues drove members of the civil service by the 1890s to deploy with increasing frequency the terms 'agriculturists' and 'agricultural tribes' in descriptions of social relations in central and western Panjab. As the Panjab and Indian administration became more concerned with the dynamics of rural indebtedness, particularly in western Panjab, the terms 'cultivator' and 'agriculturist' came to stand for self-cultivating petty landowners who, according to census analyses, organized themselves as tribes. Administrators had assigned these tribes political significance as landowners in western districts, and advocates such as S.S. Thorburn prompted policymakers in Lahore and Delhi to worry about the possibility of a dispossessed and disgruntled frontier.⁵³ In order to deny grants of colony land to indigenous inhabitants, whom the government assumed were inferior cultivators, the government had recruited 'agriculturists' from the central districts of Panjab, sometimes moving entire villages. Colonies generally produced cash crops (wheat, cotton, and sugar) which, without railway transport to major urban markets, flooded local markets and drove prices down. Colonists had to borrow money to ensure steady cash crop production and found themselves, like the petty landowning 'tribes' of western Panjab, indebted to local moneylenders. For administrators, the dilemma became one of how to keep title in the hands of the politically important petty landowning class rather than how to maintain a truly free market in land, which would have put title in the hands of financiers.⁵⁴

The government passed the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 with the intent to limit the ability of landowners to realize capital through the mortgage or sale of land, and thereby prevent moneylenders from making loans to the landowning class. Instead

it unleashed a mad scramble to prove the inclusion of one's lineage in the category of agricultural tribes, because property remained the key to political power, and advocates of the Act explicitly sought to exclude commercial and financial classes from power which would have disrupted the order established in the nineteenth century. As documented in most accounts of the effects of the Act, British administration of the Act's provision created among the gazetted agricultural tribes a new class of financiers, that is, persons owning enough property to engage in moneylending. However, the role of gazetting in the award of canal colony land in the nineteenth century had already brought Panjabis' understandings of caste or tribe names as mutable social and political tools into the open. For example, 'menial' castes in Jhang in the early twentieth century began to 'adopt' the names Bhatti and Khokhar.⁵⁵ According to Ibbetson, service castes had erroneously recorded the caste name of their patrons as their own caste names, but in the twentieth-century climate of privileged castes and tribes, administrators viewed such returns less as miscommunication between census taker and respondent and more as the insolent opportunism of unpropertied classes.⁵⁶ In another case, colonization officers in the irrigation department in Chenab Canal Colony in the 1890s limited the grant of land to indigenous herders, known generically as *janglis*, to plots of approximately seven acres per family, forcing them to become cultivators.⁵⁷ After they had proven diligent cultivators on such minuscule plots, colonization officers began in the twentieth century to reserve larger blocks of land for *janglis*.⁵⁸ As word of the privileged status of *janglis* spread, numerous individuals and families approached colonization and district officers to make claims of *jangli* status, a claim which would have been disadvantageous ten to twenty years earlier. As British uses of 'caste' and 'tribe' for social and political engineering became more obvious, Panjabis had to make more frequent and less subtle public claims in order to take advantage of the mercurial needs of the British state.

Social Categories and Property

Negotiations between British administrators and their Panjabi informants over both the content and form of social categories such as caste and tribe suggest an historical process of creation of

colonial knowledge that resembled less a 'dialogue process' and more a multivalent set of locally focused transactions.⁵⁹ While British administrators developed categories such as martial races and agricultural tribes in order to exercise greater control over Panjab, the participation of Panjabis in the development and naming of such categories meant that Panjabis were quite aware of the stakes involved in the processes of knowledge creation and could act, within certain limits, to maximize their own or their lineage's material returns on these processes. The generation of names for places (survey operations) and people (census operations) formed significant parts of those processes of conditional control and negotiation.⁶⁰ However, British administrators entered these negotiations with a notion of caste that fits remarkably well with George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's idea of ontological metaphor: '... viewing [caste] as an entity allows [the British] to refer to it, quantify it, identify a particular aspect of it, see it as a cause, act with respect to it, and perhaps even believe that [they] understand it.'⁶¹ If British administrators in Panjab developed a systematic understanding of caste that would be good for something, primarily political control, Panjabis fed and milked the system in pursuit of the one thing that increasingly mattered at the end of the nineteenth century: property in land.

The cases cited above and the main argument about the negotiated creation of knowledge suggest a series of points relevant to histories of Panjab, of 'tribal' or pastoral areas of South Asia, and of caste in South Asia. The administrative need to square the richness of local information with imperial priorities required the production of a regional or 'provincial' level of knowledge that could serve as a translator, and 'caste' or genealogical naming was one of many categories of regional knowledge. Provincial administrators such as Ibbetson fashioned regional information for an imperial audience, while at the same time they had to translate imperial narratives of caste to scores of local census and survey takers. Translation also took place within the region. British attempts to transfer the social meanings of caste from the settled parts of eastern Panjabi *desh* onto the unsettled *bar* of southwestern Panjab failed until awards of state largesse began to be tied to *deshi* caste categories. This pattern of privileging settled cultivating areas over unsettled pastoral areas appeared repeatedly throughout northern and central India. Caste, as distinct from

tribe, became one of many administrative tools for the settlement of uncultivated land and, as such, allowed administrators of regions of provinces to communicate with each other. Region, therefore, becomes one of many analytical frameworks available to understand the history of caste in South Asia, and equally caste becomes a way to understand the significance of region.

Notes

1. W.H. Rattigan, *A Digest of Civil Law for the Punjab, Chiefly Based on the Customary Law as at Present Ascertained*, 13th edn, revised by Om Prakash Aggarawala, Allahabad, 1953, pp. xv–xvi. Some of the research used in this article was funded by a grant from the South Asia Program of the Social Science Research Council, with funds provided by the Near and Middle East Research and Training Act.
2. Punjab Archives, Lahore (hereafter PAL), Political Department Proceedings (hereafter PDP), file no. 11–24, vol. 1, 29/5/58 [R. Temple, Secretary to Chief Commissioner Punjab], to John Lawrence, Chief Commissioner Punjab, 14 May [1858?], para. 8. Emphasis in the original.
3. Rosane Rocher, 'British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government', in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Delhi, 1994, pp. 215–49.
4. Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, Lahore, 1916.
5. Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1999, p. 139, and Ibbetson, pp. 4–6; see Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton, 2001, for a recent and thorough discussion of orientalist clichés and their relationship to emergent meanings of caste within the British administration.
6. Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 30–61.
7. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-First Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley*, Delhi, 1984, p. 10.
8. Romila Thapar, 'Genealogy as a Source of Social History', in *Ancient Indian Social History, Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 328.
9. Dirk H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 57–8.
10. Kolff, pp. 109 and 133.

11. David Gilmartin, 'Biraderi and Bureaucracy: The Politics of Muslim Kinship Solidarity in Twentieth Century Punjab', *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, vol. I (I), 1994, pp. 3–4.
12. W.G. Osborne, *The Court and Camp of Ranjeet Singh*, reprint, Delhi, 1973, pp. xxi–xxii. Emphasis in the original.
13. J.S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, Cambridge, 1990; New Delhi, 1994, p. 93.
14. Veena Sachdeva, *Polity and Economy of the Punjab during the Late Eighteenth Century*, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 94–7. For a colourful account of the career of Dhara Singh of the Gugera family between 1846 and 1858, see the accumulated correspondence in PAL, PDP file no. 31–33, 18/9/58.
15. F. Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary*, reprint, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 88 and 995; John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, London, 1911; reprint Lahore, 1994, pp. 63 and 796. It is worth noting that in the most frequently cited Arabic–English dictionary 'caste' does not appear among the permutations. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, J. Milton Cowan, ed., 3d edn, Ithaca, 1976, p. 800.
16. In other parts of India, these tracts were more numerous, as a wider range of lineages sought official recognition as landowners and other privileged classes. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 92.
17. Maulvi Nur Muhammad Chela Sial, *Tarikh-e-Jhang Sial*, 1863, pp. 12, 20. The author also uses *qaum* in the phrases *qaum-e-punwar* and *aqwam-e-rajput*, suggesting the further flexibility of the term. *Tarikh-e-Jhang Sial*, p. 4.
18. The District Gazetteer of Montgomery District does claim that 'enmity to the Sials was the bowl of union among the Kharrals', but this remark comes at the end of a plot summary of the *qissa* of Mirza-Sahiban which singles out the (Upera) Kharals of Danabad as the social unit engaged in combat, rather than the entire array of Kharal subdivisions. *Montgomery District Gazetteer 1883–84*, pp. 62–3.
19. *Political Diaries of Lt Reynell G. Taylor, et al., 1847–1849*, Allahabad, 1915, p. 433. Pindi Bhattian sits approximately 10 km from the east bank of the Chenab River, 35 km north-east of Chinlot, a total distance of 145 km from Kamalia.
20. For example, PAL, Revenue Department Proceedings (hereafter RDP), file no. 75–77, 13/7/50. No. 201, M.P. Edgeworth, Commissioner (hereafter C) Multan, to P. Melvill, Secretary to Board of Administration, Punjab, 3 July 1850.
21. *Chenab Colony Gazetteer, 1904*, pp. 16–17.
22. H.L.O. Garrett and G.L. Chopra, eds, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh, 1810–1817*, Lahore, 1935; reprint, Patiala, 1970, pp. 132 and 144, for

- example. Compare with Muhammad Sadiq Khan of Bahawalpur, to whom the court reports always refer as 'Nawab'.
23. Garrett and Chopra, *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh*, pp. 246 and 258; *Jhang District Gazetteer 1883–84*, p. 36.
 24. *Press Lists of Old Records in the Punjab Civil Secretariat Record Office, Lahore*, vol. XVI, 'Chief Commissioner's Administration, Punjab, in the Revenue Department', Lahore, n.d.
 25. Peter Penner, *The Patronage Bureacracy in North India: The Robert M. Bird and James Thompson School, 1820–1870*, Delhi, 1986, ch. 10.
 26. Andrew J. Major, *Return to Empire: Punjab under the Sikhs and British in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Karachi, 1996.
 27. W.L. Conran and H.D. Craik, *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab*, vol. I, Lahore, 1909, all three volumes reprinted as a single volume, Lahore, 1993, pp. i–viii.
 28. The Oriental and India Office Collection, London (hereafter OIOC), Punjab RDP (General) 9A August, no. 447, H.E. Perkins, C. Multan, to Secretary to the Financial C (hereafter FC) Punjab, 8 May 1882, para 6.
 29. OIOC, Punjab RDP (Revenue) 5A September 1891, no. 174, H.C. Cookson, Deputy C (hereafter DC) Multan, to C. Lahore, 7 May 1890, para 9.
 30. OIOC, Punjab RDP (Revenue) 2A November 1893, no. 298, Lt Col. J.B. Hutchinson, C Lahore, to Senior Secretary to the FC Punjab, 28 March 1893, para. 4; orders passed in OIOC, Punjab RDP (Revenue) 9A November 1893, no. 246, J.M. Doule, Officiating Revenue Secretary to the Government Punjab, to Senior Secretary FC Punjab, 14 November 1893.
 31. PAL, PDP file no. 31–3, 18/9/58, no. 492, Capt. B.T. Retd. DC Gugera, to Lt Col. G.W. Hamilton, C Multan, 1 July 1858, para 2.
 32. PAL, PDP file no. 31–3, no. 531, Capt. B.T. Retd, DC Gugera, to Lt Col. G.W. Hamilton, C Multan, 15 July 1858, para 3.
 33. PAL, PDP file no. 31–3, 18/9/58, no. 266, R. Temple, Secretary to Chief Commissioner Punjab, to Secretary to Government [of India?], 18 September 1858, para. 4–5; for a tabular statement of government's final award to Dhara Singh, see PAL, PDP file no. 8–9, 12/5/60.
 34. For a more thorough treatment of the relationship between officers of the Indian Civil Service, particularly Ibbetson, and Maine, see Clive Dewey, 'The Influence of Sir Henry Maine on Agrarian Policy in India', in Alan Diamond, ed., *The Victorian Achievement of Sir Henry Maine*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 353–75.
 35. C.L. Tupper, ed., *Punjab Customary Law*, vol. 2, Calcutta, 1881, p. 1.
 36. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 17 and 21.
 37. Allah Ditta *et al.* v. Beg, 48 P.R. 1909, 160.

38. Ibid., 161.
39. The judge in *Inayat v. Mt Bharai*, *A.I.R.*, 1928 *Lah.* 291, thought it best to disallow or avoid considering the genealogies, presented by *mirasis* from both complainants, as having been constructed expressly for the purpose of this case. According to Rose, *mirasis* were a type of menial labourer whose ordinary or 'traditional' duty was to memorize and recite genealogies of their patrons: H.A. Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, vol. 3, Lahore, 1914, pp. 105–19.
40. *Mian Kasim v. Samail et al.*, *I.P.R.* 1910, pp. 11–12. The appellate court of course upheld the lower court's decision in this case.
41. Ibbetson's report on the Punjab Census was published in 1883; in the same year, a reprint of the sections of the Census report dealing with 'the Religions, the Languages, and the Races, Castes and Tribes of the people' was published under the title 'Panjab Ethnography.' The sections of the latter volume dealing with races, castes, and tribes were reprinted posthumously as *Punjab Castes* (see note 4, above). Publishers in India and Pakistan have reprinted *Punjab Castes* rather than the other volumes.
42. Ibid., *Punjab Castes*, pp. 1–2.
43. Ibid., p. 10.
44. Ibid., pp. ii and vii.
45. Ibid., p. 32.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., p. 33.
48. Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia', in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 242–3.
49. E.B. Steedman, *Report on the Revised Settlement of the Jhang District of the Punjab, 1874–1880*, Lahore 1882.
50. Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*, Berkeley, 1985.
51. A.E. Barstow, *The Sikhs: An Ethnology*, 1928; reprint, Delhi, 1985; A.H. Bingley, *Sikhs*, reprint, Patiala, 1970; J.M. Wilkeley, *Punjabi Musalmans*, Calcutta, 1915; R.T.I. Ridgway, *Pathans*, Calcutta, 1910; A.H. Bingley, *History, Caste & Culture of Jats and Gujars*, reprint, New Delhi, 1978. For each zone, Bingley gives a list of Jat clans and a brief description, followed by a list of Gujar clans with description.
52. For a thorough listing of these benefits, see Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism*, Princeton, 1988, and Tai Yong Tan, 'Maintaining the Military Districts: Civil–Military Integration and District Soldiers' Boards in the Punjab, 1919–1939', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 28 (4), 1994, pp. 833–74. These benefits tempted several families of Panjabis to claim martial race status: see Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*, and

- the case of the Mahton Rajputs in Cohn, 'The Census . . . in South Asia', pp. 248–9.
53. For example, S.S. Thorburn, *Musulmans and Money-lenders in the Punjab*, Edinburgh and London, 1896; Malcolm Lyall Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt*, London, 1925; see also Clive Dewey's detailed treatment of Darling in his *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service*, London, 1993.
 54. N.G. Barrier, *The Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900*, Durham, 1966; P.H.M. van den Dungen, *The Punjab Tradition: Influence and Authority in Nineteenth-Century India*, London, 1972; Imran Ali, *The Punjab under Imperialism*.
 55. *Jhang District Gazetteer 1929*, pp. 53–4. See also C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 22; and *Multan District Gazetteer 1923–24*, pp. 92–3.
 56. Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, pp. 19–20.
 57. *Punjab Revenue Report 1891–92*, appendix E, p. xxviii.
 58. OIOC, Punjab RDP (Irrigation) 2A, April 1893, Lt Col. J.W. Ottley, 'Notes on Inspection by Chief Engineer, Irrigations Works, Punjab', para. 55; OIOC, Punjab RDP (Irrigation) 6A, May 1893, 'Note by Lt Col. J.B. Hutchinson, C Lahore, on the Colonization of the Rakh Branch, Chenab Canal', para 2.
 59. C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 370.
 60. James C. Scott, John Tehranian, and Jeremy Mathias, 'The Production of Legal Identities Proper to States: The Case of the Permanent Family Surname', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 44(1), 2002, pp. 4–44.
 61. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago and London, 1980, p. 26.

Civilizations, Markets, and Services

Village Servants in India from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries*

SUMIT GUHA

Introduction

This article offers a historical analysis of the debate stemming from opposed understandings of a South Asian socio-economic institution and of its social history through the past few centuries. It focuses specifically on the economically, socially, and ritually significant practices grouped under the label of *jajmani* and/or *baluta* system. These have been presented as exemplars of how productive activity can be organized on 'non-economic' principles, untouched by individualism and market rationality and determined by the fundamentally religious values of Hindu society. The missionary-anthropologist W.H. Wiser is usually credited with the earliest formal statement on these lines.¹ A year after the second edition had appeared in 1958, the entire religious formulation was sharply criticized by Thomas Beidelman who argued that the system was maintained only by the exercise of the socio-economic power that arose from land-holding.² As we shall see below, the influential Louis Dumont,

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perhaps heedful of this critique, did not use Wiser's description as evidence of the equalizing role of religious incorporation: instead he cited *jajmani* as evidence that a fundamentally inegalitarian spiritual principle could transcend and limit not merely the political but also the economic domain.

This is an issue with implications beyond the narrow worlds of Indology or social anthropology. While I do not intend to address this in the present article, the heuristic assumption that human beings must be grouped into large, temporally stable, and mutually exclusive 'civilizations' is central to the thought of Dumont and his ilk. This guiding principle once admitted, scholarly effort then logically seeks to identify the unifying demarcating principle of each civilization; and as the 'unique national spirit' so popular in the nineteenth century fell out of fashion after World War I, the seemingly more benign but still mutually incommunicable civilizational (or cultural) identity acquired a new prominence in the academy. Projected geopolitically, the 'civilization' is then endowed with the Hobbesian, self-aggrandizing traits of the erstwhile nation: and this model found its popularizer in 1996, with the runaway success of Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations*.³

Returning to Dumont on *jajmani*, it becomes evident that the effort to determine whether the economic (or political or any other mental construct) 'encompasses' or 'controls' arises fundamentally from the drive to find a unifying civilizational principle. Economic success being permanently reserved for the West, something else had to be found for India; and what better candidate than Hinduism, broadly construed? South Asian society then had to be amputated to fit the Procrustean bed thus fashioned. Twelve centuries of Islam counted for nothing:

It is in short a question of two societies [Hinduism and Islam] which were strangers to one another in virtue of the opposition of their values, although living cheek by jowl in fact, their association resting on a sort of tacit and reciprocal compromise. For their part the Hindus had to adjust themselves for long periods and over huge regions to political masters who did not recognize Brahmanic values, and they did not treat even the most humble Muslim villagers as untouchables.⁴

This sweeping statement can only be made if we understand 'society' so as to exclude many of the transactions that people routinely

have with each other from the ambit of this term. Such a formulation is an obstacle rather than an aid to understanding. Perhaps what we need to do is eschew grand unifying principles and try to understand the meanings and motives that generate the repetitive patterns of meaningful interaction that we refer to as a 'society' or a 'social practice' or 'institution'. Nor should we anachronistically force these into boxes labelled economic/ social/ political/ religious/ etc. I shall now try and demonstrate this by a study of the links between the state, ascriptive status ('caste'), and economic life in western India through the past three centuries.

The first section of this article discusses the varying positions taken by major scholars on the issue before moving to historical analyses of two related institutions: *baluta* and *jajmani*. *Baluta* is used to describe a system in which specified goods and services were provided by hereditary functionaries to (theoretically) *all* the households in a given village community in return for equally specific payments in kind (sometimes supplemented with cash) at the harvest and on festive occasions. *Jajmani* has entered sociological literature to describe the relationship between a patron household and individual servant households that supplied it (and others like it) with goods or services in return for payments at harvest and on other occasions. While some scholars have seen these as distinct from each other, others like Dumont have treated them as expressions of a single civilizational principle. I shall, however, use these terms as defined in this paragraph.

The next part looks at evidences of the geographical spread and economic logic of the *jajmani* system in the twentieth century, and suggests that rent-seeking and the market were important determinants of its changing structure and regional prevalence. This section is followed by one offering a historical analysis of *baluta* in Maharashtra from the seventeenth century onward. It suggests that the practice was always fraught with conflict and provides evidence of its occasional breakdown and re-establishment. It would follow, then, that the system may have repeatedly come into being and disintegrated in different regions at various times. The last part of the article shows this process at work. The institution was little known in eastern Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh in the early nineteenth century when it was solidly established in western Maharashtra. But intensive local enquiries reveal that it was beginning to establish itself in the eastern region. After reviewing this case, the article moves to conclude that

baluta was not a primitive institution, but one that was created by the state out of competition between specialists in a commercializing rural society. Finally I must emphasize that this society was not composed of socially indistinguishable agents, each of whom was devoid of tastes, preferences and socio-religious ideas.⁵

Moving Beyond 'Economic versus Cultural' Explanations

The 'village servant system' or *baluta* system (to use its Marathi name) and *jajmani* system have attained a certain importance in social theory because they appear to exemplify the possibility of organizing the division of labour in complex societies on principles radically different from those formulated by mainstream economics since the eighteenth century. It is for this reason significant in the substantivist-formalist debate in economic anthropology, inaugurated by Polanyi in the late 1940s. This debate has prevented us from examining a changing set of institutional practices on its own terms, and thus impeded rather than aided a historical understanding of it. This was noted by C.J. Fuller some years ago. On the basis of a review of about a dozen twentieth-century village studies,⁶ and some secondary historical literature, he correctly concluded that the concept of *jajmani* as a 'system' is 'predicated upon a combination of historical inaccuracy and the ahistorical premise of unchanging "traditional" India.' He then suggests that his demolition might open the way to 'a more productive analysis of forms of exchange in Indian society . . .'⁷ This article aims at advancing that agenda.

But the debate is also significant as it forms (in the work of Dumont) a central support of the idea that South Asian (or Hindu) civilization is founded on principles totally different from those of the West, and that the caste 'system' is fundamental to it. More recently, Morton Klass reinstated caste theoretically as the economic centre of South Asian society. He was satisfied that 'one may view the South Asian caste system as a crucial integrative feature of a particular redistributive economic system . . . this is a stratified society: not everyone has equal or even equivalent access to the basic resource—land on which to grow a crop. And in this particular stratified society, we have observed that control and access is neither by individuals nor by households . . .

Rather . . . *the South Asian socioeconomic system is structurally inseparable from the "caste system"*.⁸ In this he was echoing the work of W.C. Neale who had already declared that the 'economy of India was built upon the joint family, which was generally able to satisfy its own needs. When the aid of a craftsman or a special service such as that of a watchman was required, the village provided it. Cutting across village lines . . . the castes provided a code of behavior governing the relationships between members of the various castes.'⁹ So perfect was the ideological integration that Neale imagined there 'was no bargaining, and no payment for specific services rendered. There was no accounting . . . and the whole produce was easily and successfully divided among the villagers.'¹⁰

Contrast this to the reality of a North Indian village around 1950, as described in the memoir of a Dalit youth who grew up in it. He narrates an incident deeply revealing of the actual texture of *jajmani* relations: his mother worked for 8 or 10 Tyagi households. One of these was celebrating a daughter's wedding, and his mother waited with him and his younger sister to clear up and take away the basket in which the guests threw their used leaf-plates and uneaten food. These scraps were her remuneration for the extra work. When all the guests had left, she asked for a leaf-cup of food for her children.

Sukhdev Singh pointed to the basket full of soiled leaf-plates, and said, 'She is taking a full basket of food-refuse (*juthan*) . . . and on top of that asks food for her children. Mind your status, O Chuhril pick up the basket and get out!'

. . . That day the goddess Durga descended into my mother. I had never seen her thus before. She scattered the contents of the basket, and said to Sukhdev Singh, 'Gather this and store it in your house. Feed it to your guests for breakfast. . . .' She took our hands and left, swift as an arrow. Sukhdev Singh had stepped forward to strike her but she faced him down like a tigress. From that day she never went to their door again and the custom of collecting soiled scraps ended in our household.¹¹

Economic and political weakness and social inferiority continued seamlessly into labour market settings:

Most Tagas [upper-caste landowners claiming Brahman status] stint on wages for their employees. The reapers were desperate. After some protests, they took whatever was given and came home. Upon getting home, they

grumbled or kept cursing the Tagas. But protest was strangled by hunger. Each year, there were meetings in the [Dalit] quarter over harvest-wages. Participants would swear not to accept less than one bundle out of sixteen harvested. But once the work was done, their resolve evaporated: one bundle out of twenty-one was the best that could be got.¹²

Neale's ideas of harmonious reciprocity are a less developed form of Dumont's famous understanding of South Asian civilization over the past few millennia as being constructed on the foundation of a normative inequality—something radically different from the allegedly Western norm of equality. In his view these relations of service were the most deeply resistant to the modernizing impact of the West: in the revised edition of *Homo hierarchicus*, he concludes:

in the caste system, profession is linked to status only by its religious aspects, and for the rest hinges on power, it has been possible for new neutral and urban professions to emerge, while the professions *really relevant* to the system (village specialities) were only slightly affected. At most it is likely that jajmani has become restricted to properly religious and personal services and has let escape some professions which it covered previously . . . *In the caste system the politico-economic aspects are relatively secondary and isolated.*¹³

We may, in passing, notice that this assumes right away that 'the caste system' is something quite distinct from the 'politico-economic' and that a profession easily separates into 'religious' and 'power-related' aspects. These, as I shall demonstrate, are profoundly ill-informed ideas—and, given the publication of Fukazawa's important essay in English in 1972,¹⁴ perhaps deliberately so. In part, this arises from a truly archaic understanding of concrete market phenomena. Dumont believes that

In a market all buyers and all sellers are as such identical, each after his own profit, and needs are adjusted unconsciously, by the market mechanism. But this is not the case here [the Indian village]: not only are the majority of the relationships personal, but this is so in virtue of an organization which is to some extent deliberate and oriented towards the satisfaction of the needs of all those who enter into the system of relationships . . .

Whilst directly religious prestations and 'economic' prestations are mingled together, this takes place within the prescribed order, the religious

order . . . We shall feel in the end that we are not in the world of the *modern economic individual*, but in a sort of co-operative where the main aim is to ensure the subsistence of everyone in accordance with his social function . . . In the one case, the reference is to *the individual* pursuing his own gain, in the other to *the hierarchical collectivity* . . .¹⁵

The conclusion to be drawn from this for the *jajmani* system is that it eludes what we call economics because it is founded on an implicit reference to the whole, which, in its nature, is religious or, if one prefers, a matter of ultimate values.¹⁶

The above quotation assumes that markets can only function by erasing all identities in the marketplace. In fact, it is only under special conditions that buyers and sellers can really become anonymous and indistinguishable. As anybody (and especially a white anthropologist) who has shopped in a bazaar should know, buyers and sellers can find it advantageous to try and negotiate the best possible terms on a case by case basis, drawing information from signs of visible social status, including appearance, speech, dress, etc., to assess the other party. Equally, if buyers are not homogenous, neither are commodities, services, etc.: a vendor who sold at a uniform price could benefit from the ignorance of some consumers.

Uniform prices for homogenous products emerge in mass markets supplied by machine production, markets where learning about the other party is costly, either in direct money terms (e.g., buying a credit report) or in terms of opportunity costs (e.g., losing sales while getting this information via bargaining or personal enquiry). So the early Industrial Revolution and the modern city encouraged the emergence of mass markets where standardized goods were sold to a mass of indistinguishable buyers. But efforts at discriminatory pricing immediately re-emerge when the individual transaction increases in size or when the cost of information acquisition and processing falls. Such individualized bargaining is almost routine in trade in 'big-ticket' items (e.g., ships, passenger or combat aircraft, or turnkey industrial plants) where a few agents, who have a lot of knowledge about each other, interact. Finally, as modern information technology reduces the cost of acquiring and processing information, even vendors of mass-market consumer goods in developed countries (particularly the USA) try and build up consumer preference data-bases and profiles.

The simple anonymity and 'no information except price available' is a model that dominated Western consumer goods markets after the Industrial Revolution and up to the current infotech revolution, which has substantially eroded it.¹⁷ It should not be expected to shed much light on economic relations in typical South Asian rural situations where repeated interactions between a small number of transactors with a great deal of time on their hands.

In fact, discriminatory pricing based on social or other distinctions is advantageous if it allows one participant to appropriate some or all of the consumer surplus resulting from the transaction. A.C. Pigou in 1920 had already considered how discriminatory pricing might operate if agents could be grouped into sets distinguished 'by some practicable mark'. He also thought that even in the absence of such a mark, it might be possible to establish 'ideal discrimination' by detailed separate bargaining with every separate customer.¹⁸ Needless to say, both these strategies are found in South Asian market settings precisely because the limited communications infrastructure limits the size of the market and almost makes information a free good. People have grown up together and effortlessly know a great deal about each other.

Moving on to another aspect of *jajmani*: the sharing systems and payments in kind that lead Dumont to imagine that the village is 'a sort of co-operative . . .'.¹⁹ These systems of payment are easily amenable to economic explanation: they both provide incentives and spread the risks resulting from unpredictable fluctuations in yields and prices. But let us return to Dumont:

What is the principle behind what is called the *jajmani* system? In the first place it makes use of hereditary personal relationships to express the division of labour: each family has a family of specialists at its disposal for each specialized task. Secondly, it regulates prestations and counter-prestations in a way which accords with custom: for the usual tasks, repayment is kind: it is not made individually for each particular prestation but is spread over the whole year, as is natural for a permanent relationship in an agricultural setting . . . A fact which underlines the limited but effective solidarity which is thus set up between *jajman* and *praja* is that in many regions those who are considered the main servants of the village enjoy an allotment of land from a communal fund set apart by their patrons.

It is here that the division of labour that forms an integral part of the caste system may be most clearly understood.²⁰

I cannot claim to be the first to say that the above-quoted passage is full of misunderstandings. First of all, the division of labour existed, and exists, independently of these dyadic relations—this is evidenced by the easy replacement of hereditary specialists occasioned by disputes, emigration, etc. Clearly then, the division of labour arises from the economic efficiency of specialization in most occupations: specialists usually do a better job. Secondly, the quantum of prestation (or payment) is seen by Dumont as practically fixed by immutable custom—but custom (as we shall see below) is continually contested and re-made by cheating, evasion, flight, and violence deployed by both villagers and superior authorities. Finally, the allocation of land to village servants was not done by their ‘patrons’ but by extra-village authorities, typically the patrimonial State. I must remark that the division of labour is accepted uncritically by Dumont—yet his schema does not require any division of economic functions—only of the polluting functions, which must be relegated to specialists, regardless of cost. If we admit additional division of labour aimed at securing higher productivity, we have already admitted economic considerations into the model of professional specialization.

Furthermore, the covert presence (and periodic overt deployment) of coercion implies that organizations are held together by something more than an unquestioning cooperative orientation to the fundamental values of the community. Again, even if there is a general societal consensus around the idea of hierarchy, this by no means precludes efforts at changing the individual agent’s rank in it; and since the upward movement of some is equivalent to the downward displacement of others, such differences can only be settled by the deployment of socio-economic resources—expended in the means of coercion or the accessories of status-building. In short, the presence of hierarchical organizations does not exclude the possibility of individuals nonetheless pursuing their own ends by the deployment of resources calculated as adequate to their ends; which is to say, it does not exclude either individualistic rationality or calculation. If I may digress, I can also point out that Dumont (and others) were theorizing in the twentieth century when economic activity, far

from being conducted between myriads of atomized, anonymous individuals, was largely ordered by complex and hierarchical corporate organisations which engaged strategically with each other, and which were in practice constituted of numerous small-scale entities with their own unwritten norms and customs.²¹ But this has not precluded maximizing behaviour by individuals within the setting of targeted discrimination by groups either.²² So, to conclude, there is nothing about the observable functioning of village service institutions that requires us to turn to the allegedly eternal religious foundations of Indian civilization for an explanation.

Did *Jajmani* have a History?

For Dumont, *jajmani* like the Hindu tradition was practically timeless—it had no history. His source, W.H. Wiser, thought it had a history, and so have several later scholars. Wiser, who studied a solitary north Indian village from the 1920s, is usually credited with being the first scholar to formulate the idea of *jajmani* as an organized system, and one with ancient roots in Indic civilization. But unlike Dumont, Wiser believed that what he described in Karimpur was a relic of an ancient social organization, and therefore quite recent. In 1958, he wrote:

The Hindu Jajmani System as it stands today in Karimpur is a disintegrated form of the ancient Village Commune.

The Hindu Jajmani System as it stands today in Karimpur is ancient in that it recognizes the claims of the different occupational groups to a share of the earnings of the village as a whole, but it is not ancient in its detailed form as described in the preceding pages.²³

Clearly, Wiser believed that something approximating to the western Indian *baluta* system had existed almost until his arrival: this had then disintegrated to generate *jajmani*. In this respect he would agree with Peter Mayer, whose detailed analysis of the evidence on *jajmani* in English-language sources was published in 1993. Mayer traced the earliest English mention of *jajmani* to Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson* of 1855. A complete description of a dyadic relationship akin to that depicted by Wiser was found in E.A.H. Blunt's Census Report of 1911 for the United Provinces. Mayer also presented a

novel view of *jajmani*—he saw it as the reaction by various service groups to new opportunities and pressures arising out of British rule and associated changes in the urban and rural economies. Notably, he saw it as resulting from the accelerated break-up of collective village tenures in which the landholding body collectively paid the land tax and regulated the services of the various village servants. The ‘exclusive right to serve individual families of patrons’ that came to be called *jajmani* (he speculatively suggests) may have originated no later than the settlement of British civil servants and others in the towns of north India.²⁴ He is also at pains to confine it to northern India, and to distinguish it and its precursors from the village servant systems of the Indian peninsula. He concludes that *jajmani* ‘was probably in widespread existence in Uttar Pradesh for less than thirty years when Blunt first described it in 1911.’²⁵

Blunt continued to examine the issue of caste through subsequent decades. He concluded that occupational castes, some of whom exercised traditional claims upon *jajmans*, actually originated in artisanal guilds of the first millennium CE, and would, in the twentieth century, move towards trade unionism irrespective of caste. An identical impulse created the trade guilds, the functional castes, and the twentieth-century landholders’ associations and *mazdur sabhas* (workers’ associations): ‘namely—the desire of men with common interests to unite for the protection of those interests . . .’²⁶ Thus the author of perhaps the only large-scale survey of caste in the middle Gangetic plains saw not merely *jajmani*, but *all* inter-caste economic relations generally as exclusively economic in nature. The distance of this from the Dumontian idea of the religious encompassing the economic need hardly be stressed.

Migrants, Markets, and Institutions

Mayer’s emphasis on the changing, regionally diverse and entrepreneurial nature of inter-household relations is well taken, and is supported by a valuable ethnographic source—the *Report of the Committee on Customary Rights to Scavenging* published by the Government of India in 1966. This committee corresponded with a number of State governments and also made local inquiries in many parts of northern and southern India before submitting its report in 1966.

The 'customary right' described had all the features of what is referred to as *jajmani*.

One particular scavenger acquires a right to clean such latrines, as against another scavenger. In small towns he is generally paid in kind (a daily *roti*) and some perquisites like food or clothes, etc., on some special occasion like births, marriages, deaths, etc., varying with the status of the householder. Often in bigger towns he is also paid partially in cash . . . and in cities he is generally paid only in cash. It is said that in times of need they sell or mortgage their rights to other scavengers in the same manner as one does with one's property . . .

Where customary rights exist in the old form . . . the householder can change his scavenger only with the consent of the latter. In such cases the old scavenger enters into a deal with the new one who pays the former some amount according to the status of the householder. These transactions in common parlance are known as the selling of a particular *Brit*.

The status of human faeces in the purity-pollution schema must be obvious. If *jajmani* was an institution designed to cope with this (and other) polluting substances, it should have been present almost everywhere. But contrary to Dumont's belief that *jajmani* was 'more or less universal' in India, the committee found the 'old form' (or what anthropological literature described as *jajmani*) did not extend even to eastern Uttar Pradesh. It was found in the west and centre of that State, in Rajasthan, in Madhya Pradesh (excluding the eastern Mahakoshal—present Chhattisgarh—region), mainly in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, in Punjab, and in (predominantly Muslim) Jammu and Kashmir. It was also found (as a recent importation) in the Telangana districts of Andhra Pradesh and parts of Marathwada (eastern Maharashtra).²⁷

The committee also sought to discover the origins of the system. It remarked on the fact that indoor latrines were few in the countryside and had usually belonged to people of high status who would not relieve themselves *al fresco*. These were cleaned by the village sweepers, who like other rural servants 'had a claim in each harvest. The quantity of foodgrains given to them was fixed according to the status of the *Jajman*. This type of *Jajmani* system still prevails in many areas. Apart from foodgrains and in some cases land, these artisans also got new or

old clothes annually and perquisites . . . on ceremonial occasions like births and marriages and during festivals.' The committee plausibly suggested that wealthy rural households gradually moved to the towns accompanied by their servants; the latter then sought to monopolize their patrons by the custom described above. Long-distance migration from areas where the practice was prevalent could also transfer the usage: thus, numbers of Balmikis from western Uttar Pradesh and present-day Haryana migrated to the old Hyderabad state and divided the growing urban areas into beats held under customary law. Older local groups may have withdrawn or been bought out. 'In Marathwada also there is no local scavenging caste except a few Muslim Sheikhs. Mahars do only sweeping work. Scavengers from North India purchased *Brits* from local scavengers (generally Muslim Sheikhs).' It is evident that economic calculation was very much present in these transactions. Nor indeed was rent-seeking (and finding) unknown. In the town of Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh, there were 'only 18 Bhangis having *Brit-Jajmani* . . . Subsequently it was revealed that all of them had employed servants, usually municipal sweepers not having their own *Brits* for cleaning private latrines. The latter are only allowed to take *rotis* from households served by them. It was alleged that if the cash income from the families served by a tenant scavenger was, say, Rs 25 p.m., the *ilagedar* would give only Rs 2 p.m. to the servant and pocket the rest of the money.'²⁸

There were also entrepreneurs who acquired monopolies in newly urbanizing areas. 'These intermediaries or contractors by their shrewdness or cleverness enter into negotiations with new colonisers [developers] and set up new Jagirs.' This was also a channel for the investment of capital: the buyers of *brits* in Marathwada were often financed by Balmiki capitalists in Hyderabad at high rates of interest.²⁹ Despite so much evidence for adaptation to economic opportunity, the committee persisted in seeing disputes between householders and scavengers as a recent departure from traditional mutualism and ancient harmony. This was unsupported by any evidence: and, in fact, as we shall see below, the earliest records of this system are records of disputes and conflicts.

Much of the evidence here thus supports Peter Mayer's contention that the *jajmani* system was in many ways an innovation. Simon Commander, like Mayer, is sceptical of the cultural explanations of

the relationships and prefers to view them as a form of labour relation, a type of piece-rated labour payment in kind, which goes into decline in the later colonial era as a consequence of migration, rising prices, and growing pressure on the land—a view not supported by the evidence cited above.³⁰ Mayer is, in fact, engaged in an attempt to portray *jajmani* as a novel and transitional relationship of service and payment, one which lasted little more than half a century and whose rise and decay may both be located within the colonial era. He also confines his analysis to north India, deprecating the attempts made by Beidelman and others, including Wiser, to assimilate the north Indian dyadic relationships with the village servant systems found in much of southern and western India. Radical though Mayer and Commander's critiques of *jajmani* as an ancient system may be, yet they join Wiser in subscribing to the village community and village servant system as an ancient functional organization, whose origins are presumably lost in the mists of time. The rest of this article will attempt a history of that organization itself.

The Village Servant System from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century

The late Hiroshi Fukazawa was perhaps the earliest scholar to attack the issue of *baluta* and *jajmani* in the pre-colonial period and to use contemporary sources rather than the conveniently accessible colonial reconstructions of the period.³¹ He cogently warned that what is taken as traditional, or extant from time immemorial, 'may actually have developed in the very recent past'.³² As Fukazawa's article is readily available, it is unnecessary for me to do more than list his main conclusions. First, he showed that the functionaries were maintained by the village as a territorial whole—thus conforming to the 'village servant' rather than the *jajmani* type of relation. He writes, 'there was one *baluta-watan* for every occupation in a village. Division of a *watan* did not increase its number; each sharer of the divided *watan* was considered to have a fraction of it. Moreover, what was divided was not the sphere of service but the emoluments from the *watan*. Therefore, in the process of division of a *watan* the related *baluta*-servants were not transformed from being "the servants of the village" to becoming "the servants of certain specific families"'.³³

But (Fukazawa continues) they were differentiated into those who held their posts as a patrimony (*watan*) and those who were sojourners without such rights. Second, there were Brahmans functioning as priests who had exclusive claims to serve specific castes, but not the village as a whole. These households could be seen as having a *jajmani* relation to those Brahmans.³⁴ Carnivorous villagers would have a *jajmani* relation with the *maulana*—a functionary probably added in western Maharashtra under the Sultanates of Ahmadnagar and Bijapur (c. 1500–1650). Writing in 1819, Thomas Coats described this functionary as existing in many villages. ‘The Mahomedan Sacrificer kills the sheep at sacrifices and festivals; his wages are a portion of grain and straw . . .’³⁵ H.H. Mann found the institution still in place a century later.³⁶

Fukazawa traced a reference to the village servant system in Max Weber, who had termed it ‘demiurgic’. Weber believed that Indian villages had allotted garden land and grazing common to ‘craftsmen, temple priests, barbers, laundrymen, and all kinds of laborers belonging to the village—the village “establishment”’. They hold on a “demiurgic” basis; that is, they are not paid for their work in detail but stand in the service of the community in return for a share in the land or in the harvest.’³⁷

What these village-centred models forget is that the community itself stood in the service of a demanding and peremptory set of overlords. Arbitrary demands for money, labour service, and produce were an inescapable feature of rural and urban life for most people. Forced labour for the needs of officials and other gentry was a heavy and erratic burden, and much of the energy of ‘village servants’ was in fact expended in rendering this government service, so as to prevent random villagers being conscripted for it.³⁸ This was evident when Sykes surveyed western Maharashtra in 1825–9, ‘[o]ccasionally the answer to my inquiries respecting the duties of the Mahars was, that they were to do everything they were ordered, whether by the Pateel, the village corporation or by the government.’³⁹ So, for instance, when Nimbalkar of Karmalleh ‘had one of his *pagas* of horse stationed near Wangi, the Mahars worked gratuitously for six months in the year, in the stables; on the removal of the *paga* Nimbalkar levied a tax on the Mahars, in place of six months stable work, but did not remit any of their ordinary duties.’ In another township, the Mahars had earlier had

the 'specific duties of gratuitously supplying all government officers who came into the district, and partly, also, the hill forts, with dry wood and grass . . .'⁴⁰

These demands continued under British rule, ending perhaps only with the introduction of motor transport. Thus S.J. Thackeray, Principal Collector, wrote from Dharwad in 1824:

As very few coolies are to be found here, and the class of Dhers and other Pariahs is quite insufficient to supply the demand, the Amildar's peons often press into service men who have never carried loads in their lives until the officers of our Government impressed them. When two or three hundred coolies are required, and only a day's notice is given for procuring them, the peons often seize upon inhabitants (with the exception of Brahmins and soucars [bankers]), indiscriminately drive them in a herd to the place of rendezvous and pen them like cattle until the arrival of the baggage.

Thackeray sought to revive what he believed was old usage and issued a proclamation requiring that 'the village officer is on no account to press the ryuts [peasants] for coolies but is to procure them without violence from the lower classes of Bedurs, Dhers, Dhungurs and other similar castes accustomed to carry burdens. Should there be not sufficient number of such persons, the deficiency shall be supplied from the neighbouring villages.'⁴¹

It is evident that the colonial administration was thus reinforcing and reviving a system of village responsibility that would in turn reinforce the *baluta* system. If the upper-caste villagers did not maintain an adequate number of village servants for such occasions, they risked being violently conscripted to replace them.

Landless and poor households were often selectively burdened by such exactions. For example, in the 1820s groups of Bhil tribals were induced to come down from the hills and settle near the villages in Khandesh, north Maharashtra. Colonial officials believed that they would be integrated into the village servant system and live peacefully thereafter as they had 'traditionally' done. The struggle over what was 'traditional and customary' now began, and the officer responsible for their resettlement warned that oppression could force them back into outlawry. He recommended that:

Services expected to be performed by Bheels of the Plains in the vicinity of Hindoo Villages in consideration of grants of Land *require to be more strictly defined*. No Bheel should be compelled to labour or forced to plough for less than Hindoo labourers, or for less wages than other Ploughmen receive; the remuneration if in Money, Grain or Cloaths should be distinctly specified . . .

Another most serious grievance is that in a village however well populated, not a Cart, a Bullock, a Driver, Guide or Begarree [forced labourer] . . . will be furnished by the Native Local Authorities from the Caste Inhabitants whilst any can possibly be pressed from the limited resources of the wretched Bheels at and in the neighbourhood of the village.⁴²

Such tussles occurred not only with socially alien groups like the Bhils but were a general feature of times when the agrarian order was recovering from war or famine. This was the case in Pune district around 1710 when Pilaji Jadhav, an important official of the Maratha state, wrote to the village officers of the region: 'You reported that your province had long been desolate. But that it was now fortunately being resettled once again. All the villages were populated once more. The [holders of] the twelve *balutas* had all returned to the villages. But they began demanding exorbitant amounts in the name of customary dues. They demanded everything you [the farmers] possessed on account of dues. So you asked us to fix the dues. So we collected everyone and considered past usage and fixed the customs. Everyone is now to conform to this settlement.'⁴³

Such pronouncements may have reduced conflicts, but conflict was always present, and recurred as individuals felt that they could exploit some fresh advantage. I quote one example from the surviving records of the period. In the mid-eighteenth century Ranoji, the headman of a village near Saswad, complained of the novel and excessive demands made by the village astrologer-Brahman (Joshi). He stated that this functionary had hitherto accepted various small cash payments from poorer families in lieu of the shawl he was entitled to receive for officiating at weddings; but he was now forcibly extracting a shawl from everyone. Again, he had formerly received *baluta* dues after the paying capacity of the farmer, the yield of the field, and the quality of the season had all been taken into account. (In other words, he

had bargained from a position of weakness.) But now he simply sent his Rangadi slave-woman to the fields with a horse, and she took as large a bundle as she wanted and loaded it on the horse. If the farmer protested, she abused him vilely. When the headman had gone to speak with the Joshi about this, the latter had threatened to beat him with a stick. The change in behaviour can be explained by the fact that the Joshi was now connected by marriage to the hereditary officers of the subdivision; clearly he was emboldened by this new alliance to enlarge his perquisites beyond the earlier 'customary' level.⁴⁴

The fact of constant, if less dramatic, bickering over the quantity and quality of payments was suggested by W.H. Sykes, who travelled through western Maharashtra for four years (1825–9) in his capacity as Statistical Reporter to the Government of Bombay and made minute inquiries in dozens of villages. 'Very rarely could I get either farmer or Bullootehdar to state specifically what the one gave, and the other was entitled to receive; it depended very much upon the crops, *and also upon the extent of services performed for each individual cultivator.*' He was told by farmers in many parts of the region that they surrendered a quarter of the crop on account of *baluta* and other dues in kind.⁴⁵

Occasionally such friction erupted into full-scale confrontation—so for instance the dispute between the Mahars of Rak and its headman went up to the great noble Fatehsinh Bhosle in 1738, and was settled only at his direction. The document enumerated the dues and duties of the Mahars on various occasions and ordered both sides to conform. Even religious functions were open to contest: thus in 1754 the Mahars of Sasvad contested the right of the Mangs to carry an earthen pot around the village as a part of the rite of exorcism. They were asked to produce evidence from the neighbouring villages that Mahars did indeed have such rights. They sought to do so, and then realized that this was against the usage of the country and withdrew their claims.⁴⁶ These two rival low-caste communities were often used to curb each other—in Sarola Kasar, a village in Ahmednagar district, the villagers replaced the hereditary Mahars with Mangs at some time in the 1920s.⁴⁷ So we may see that a good deal more than agreement on fundamental values was needed to ensure the sharing of the grain heap that Neale, Dumont, and others would see as a spontaneous social process shaped by fundamental spiritual values.

More extensive monetization, the gradual extinction of forced

labour for government purposes, and social protests by the Dalit classes marked relations between farmers and village servants by the early twentieth century. This tension forms a major theme in an early classic of Maharashtrian rural sociology—T.N. Atre's *Ganv Gada*—which is, however, written exclusively from the landholders' point of view. Atre, a middle-ranking colonial official with many decades' experience, states that unredressed rural grievances were advertised by the poisoning of cattle. If such cases became frequent in a village, then the government authorities temporarily confiscated the Mahars' patrimony on the assumption that they were behind the poisonings. Atre also describes how the district officers had (under Section 18 of the Watan Act) to assemble panchayats headed by the District Collector in order to settle these disputes. If the panchayat failed to reach a decision within seven days, the Collector gave a binding award.⁴⁸ Atre also wrote that the Mahars now only rendered free service to important people such as the headman, the district hereditary officers, and a few big farmers—and that too after they had been sought out and summoned.

The collection of customary dues is presented as a deeply conflict-ridden process; for example, he describes how village watchmen always went in bands to confront the farmer in his field. 'Going in a band means that argument, pressure and threat are deployed . . . To sum up, claims of entitlement, friendly pleas, begging, flattery and pilferage follow each other like beads on the same thread.' If caught pilfering by an enraged farmer, Atre continues, the landless castes appeased him by saying: "Baliraja! We are your footwear! How can we fill our stomachs?" If that does not make him subside, these people say, "Well, well! Is it thus?" and utter words importing bloodshed and mayhem. The poor farmer (*kunbi*) fears that they may fulfill their threats by theft, by arson or by poisoning his cattle. So he perforce allows them to carry away what they have already pilfered.'⁴⁹

Atre presents a vivid but one-sided view of the situation. In reality, here as in North India, the balance of power was tilted in favour of the landowners, and the twentieth century saw a steady decline in the dues received by village servants.

The Gokhale Institute of Pune pioneered rural surveys in Western India in the 1930s and has maintained a fine tradition of intensive village studies. M.B. Jagtap worked on the first survey of

Wai subdivision in 1936–8, and on resurveys in 1942–3, 1944–5, 1959–60, and 1966–7. He lived mainly in his study villages from 1935 to 1952.⁵⁰ His study of these villages through thirty years was published in 1970. By the 1930s there were already several villages without *balutedars*, and others where some functions were performed by craftsmen from elsewhere for cash payment. By the 1950s some *balutedars* had also ceased asking for *baluta* and preferred to work for cash payment. Jagtap notes that the *baluta* system was more completely preserved in villages like Gulumb, which were away from the main roads that depended more on local supplies and services. In 1936–7 10.98 per cent of the main foodgrain crops was paid out to *balutedars* in Gulumb, as against a low of 5.54 per cent in well-connected Ozarde. The average for three villages was 7.04 per cent. (We may recollect that in the 1820s Sykes had been told that 25 per cent of the crop was paid out as dues in kind.) By 1959–60 the shares had fallen to 3.69 per cent, and as food prices rose sharply in the 1960s, to a negligible 1.83 per cent in 1966–67. Jagtap explained this by the stoppage of payments to *balutedars* who were no longer needed, and the employment of craftsmen on a cash basis as required. Technological change also made it profitable to displace some: pumps replaced leather buckets in irrigation, and the services of the leather-worker came to an end. The largest proportionate reduction was (*pace* Dumont) in payments to sacred functionaries. The murder of Mahatma Gandhi by a Brahman led to the stoppage of payments to the Joshi in Gulumb and Kavthe after 1948. By the 1960s payments to the Mahars had also ended.⁵¹ The refusal of services and rejection of beggarly payments in kind were also part of the Ambedkarite movement from the late 1920s, and Daya Pavar's memoirs record how these practices were eroding as early as the 1930s.⁵²

Jagtap studied only three villages, but two members of the Gokhale Institute staff used the data from the survey of a sample of 72 villages in 8 districts carried out in 1951–2 to write *Maharashtrachi Gramina Samajarachna*. The disintegration of the *baluta* system was already evident. Landless families paid cash for any services they required, and in many villages the *balutedars* had divided client households among themselves. Mahars were village functionaries in 66 out of 72 villages, but only those serving the government actually received any dues from the villagers. They served by rotation and had to wait years for their

turn to come up. The Mahars were much more alienated from the village system than other functionaries. The carpenter was still the most important functionary, and found in 60 villages. Dues varied from village to village, but were usually paid per plough—or a sort of piece-rate. Iron work being more durable, the smith was a *balutedar* in only 25 villages. Even there cash had to be paid for some jobs. Many smiths preferred to locate themselves in roadside villages or towns and work for cash. Itinerant tinkers also serviced the villages. It was difficult for the investigators to ascertain the smith's *baluta* dues—they varied by special arrangements or needs. The leather-worker was a *balutedar* in 32 villages: his repair of well buckets and harness was crucial to raising irrigated crops. The description could continue. But everywhere the investigators found dues being reduced or adjusted according to economic need. Individual cultivators gave more or less depending on their employment of particular *balutedars*. The amount also reflected the yield of the harvest. Still, the investigators could clearly see that the 'village looks after those *balutedars* whose absence would cause difficulty; the others are pushed away.'⁵³

Thus even where the village servant system had official recognition and support, it was continually restructured according to calculations of individual advantage, and ultimately largely abandoned. So, to sum up—sociologists have tended to take the frequently observed dyadic relation of service and dependence as a given, as stemming from deep-seated cultural traits or fundamental values in Indian society. Implicit in this is the understanding that these are ancient institutions. Historians have been skeptical of this and inclined to argue that the dyadic relations observed in the early twentieth century were generated comparatively recently, as a consequence of the breakdown of previously extant village communities resulting from changes inaugurated by colonialism. But we need to probe deeper and ask what explains the existence of the village servant system in the precolonial era.

The Genesis of a 'Traditional Institution'

It is noticeable that all the scholars who have studied this problem have assumed that the village organization is itself a relatively unproblematic structure—arising perhaps out of the functional needs of isolated

rural life. Yet it is striking that the system was strongly developed not in the most isolated regions of eighteenth-century Maharashtra, but rather in its densely settled and commercialized regions. Much (indeed almost all) of our evidence on its functioning comes from official efforts at its regulation and control. I suggest that this formal and regular structuring originated in the opportunity for the securing of rents (as fees or gifts or bribes) and the consequent preparedness of entrepreneurial individuals to pay the holders of political authority for the creation and protection of such rights. An important aspect of the *jajmani* system is then merely one example of a widespread phenomenon—rent-seeking and the investment of resources in creating permanent, heritable sources of rents. It is significant that these village offices were called *watan* (sometimes *vrutti*—both best translated as patrimony), and thus seen as analogous to other property rights.

Thus at the same time as the detailed descriptions of village servants with fixed dues in kind were being compiled in western Maharashtra, little trace of any such system could be found in thinly populated areas where the cash economy was undeveloped and the need for fixed services should have been all the greater. For example, Chhattisgarh (formerly part of the state of Madhya Pradesh) was in the early nineteenth century a landlocked region with limited trade. When Jenkins wrote his report, he remarked on the absence of *watandars*—that is, of headmen or peasants possessed of hereditary rights in this area, by contrast to the Maratha territories to the west. The establishment of village servants was equally undeveloped, and those who existed were mainly employed by the *gaontia* headman (effectively tax-farmer) of each village. Even the barber 'owes professional services to all the village community, but is chiefly employed by the *gaontia* . . .' Only the smith and washerman seem to have been mainly employed for the benefit of the farming community as a whole.⁵⁴ Thus craftsmen and specialists were seen as dependants of the village lord, exactly like tenant farmers.

Much of Jenkins' knowledge was drawn from men like Vinayakrao Aurangabadkar whom he employed for nearly twenty years. Vinayakrao spent over three years travelling from village to village in Varhad and Chhattisgarh, interviewing and collecting information on local geography, institutions, antiquities, and practices. The hundreds of folios of his notes deposited in the India Office Collection in London

bear impressive witness to his industry and command over languages. Much of the material consists of direct transcripts of interviews and answers to questions.

These field notes, therefore, give us a fine-grained picture of village institutions and traditions in the early nineteenth century. Reading them, we find that both *baluta* and *jajmani* had a very limited presence in this area. Thus Vinayakrao interviewed Bhimrai Thakur and other Halba landholders of Panadur when touring that area. They understood the term *baluta* and responded: 'there are no *balutedars* in Chhattisgad, but they are found in Panadur—the carpenter receives three measures of grain per plough as does the smith. What the barber gets is determined by each farmer individually. If the local priest, Gond priest, etc., were employed that year they get a basket of grain plus two more measures.'⁵⁵

It is clear that the really essential functionary had established a fixed claim: others, including those concerned with purity (the barber) and the supernatural (the priest) had a quasi-wage relationship. This was in a small town. In the smaller villages nearer the mountains the local Kavar chiefs stated flatly: 'In our country, the custom of *balotedari* does not exist; however the smith-carpenter receives 10 measures of grain for each plough.'⁵⁶

The smith would obviously be a vital functionary in a farming economy, and it would be rational to pay him by the year rather than have to bargain every time a ploughshare had to be replaced or a tool repaired. The *khati*—carpenter-cum-smith—therefore crops up in almost every account. So, in Kanker subdivision, there were no village accountants, and Vinayakrao noted that there were no carpenters—people did their own woodwork; but the smith was present and received a basketful of grain for each plough. His clients had to bring their own iron. The washerman was given half or three-quarter *sers* of grain for each job. The *bhumak* (local priest) and the barber received some dues regularly.⁵⁷ Similarly, when landholders in Bhadak (modern Chandrapur district of Maharashtra) were questioned about the costs of cultivation, they reported that each plough paid the smith-cum-carpenter ten measures (unclear if this is *payli* or *kudo* measure) while the local priest and the village watchman received one measure each.⁵⁸ Yet, again in Balalpur subdivision, the village headmen told him that the *havaladar*—a functionary who helped collect the land-tax—received Rs 2 each month from the village fund; in addition, farmers might

give him, at pleasure, up to one *kudo* measure of grain yearly.⁵⁹ This official had been introduced by the centralizing regime of the Bhosle kings and we can perhaps see his perquisites were beginning to harden into 'custom'.

In other places it is evident that such perquisites were beginning to appear as a consequence of the creation of various offices under Bhosle rule, which was accompanied by population growth and commercialization. As these became offices of profit, individuals would begin to acquire and dispute them, providing a political and fiscal resource for the regime to exploit. In the Chimur division, too, the bigger villages had a functionary called *havaladar* who allocated compulsory labour between households, and who would consequently have considerable powers of harassment which he turned to advantage. So the local people reported that in some places he received a *kudo* of grain from each farmer, though it was not an approved usage. The headman's messenger and assistant held rent-free land from the state but also received a measure of grain from each peasant. State obligations fell on every office-holder. Even the local priest or *bhumak* was supposed to feed government messengers if they came to the village and carry messages for the headman. The priest did, however, protect the village from tigers and so received two measures of grain.⁶⁰ Umrad was a relatively more prosperous subdivision near Nagpur—much cloth was woven for export and there was an active trade in cotton, grain, etc. The term *barabalute* was known here, but the functionaries listed were: Vasi (local priest) [amount illegible]; Mahar, 10 *kudo* measures; sorcerer, 1 measure; astrologer, 1 measure, village watchman cum messenger one and a quarter measures.⁶¹ But there were no *watandars* or hereditary holders, and not even a village headman whose family had held the office for generations could claim it as a patrimony.⁶² This is a marked contrast to the more densely settled and commercialized lands of western Maharashtra, where saleable hereditary office was institutionalized by the sixteenth century, if not earlier. The reason was (I suggest) that the cash economy and competition made hereditary office a desirable acquisition, and its creation and adjudication a source of profit to the state and its ever-hungry local functionaries.

The way in which the regulation of the *baluta* system could be used to fiscal advantage can be demonstrated by a few extracts from

the surviving ledgers of several tax farmers from western Maharashtra. These span the period from about 1750 to 1825.⁶³

Half a rupee [fine realised] Mahar did not serve the village properly

One rupee Leather-worker left, the village of Pisa
went to Amboli

22 rupees Saheb Mitekhan beat a Mahar

One rupee . . . Leather worker left the village work
undone, so he was made to complete
it and fined

One and a quarter rupees Santu Potter failed to supply the mask
for Mahalakshmi, so fined

I would suggest that the opportunities for such fees and fines as well as the ruling classes' need for specialized services from the villages on a reliable basis was important in the transformation of village specialists into hereditary office-holders. The changing social and economic conditions we reviewed earlier led to the gradual demise of the institution in the twentieth century. But individualized jockeying for social and economic advantage was present at all times.

Conclusion

It will be evident that I am deeply sceptical of attempts to trace socio-economic institutions to fundamental values, and that I have found considerable evidence to suggest that individuals systematically sought to modify and invent customs and institutions to their own perceived advantage, and that the patrimonial and (the later) colonial state tried to derive fiscal and political advantage from these efforts. The varying outcomes of these ceaseless contests explains why institutions varied considerably at different times and in different regions. Society was never static, in some 'traditional' mode, and social change is not something that arrived in South Asia with colonial rule or the First Five-Year Plan.

Notes

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corrections. The usual disclaimer holds. I have translated all the citations from Indian-language sources used in this article.

1. William H. Wiser. *The Hindu Jajmani System*, Lucknow, 1936. I have used the later edition cited in note 10. Full citations of the views mentioned in this introductory section are in the body of this article. I have excluded them here for the sake of clarity.
2. Thomas O. Beidelman. *A Comparative Analysis of the Jajmani System*, New York, 1959, pp. 5–6. The historically uninformed nature of Dumont's formulation was sharply attacked by C.J. Fuller, 'Misconceiving the Grain Heap: A Critique of the Concept of the Indian Jajmani System', in J. Parry and M. Bloch, eds, *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 54–5.
3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1996; Indian Edition, Delhi, 1997.
4. Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Chicago 1980, p. 206. A point sharply made by Michelguglielmo Torri, *Storja dell'India*, Roma, 2000. pp. x–xi.
5. A spurious understanding of 'economic agents' that I find sadly prevalent in some branches of the academic world. For a formal economic model of caste discrimination via social boycott, see George A. Akerlof, 'The Economics of Caste and of the Rat Race and Other Woeful Tales', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 90(4), 1976, pp. 609–17.
6. It may be recollected that the 1931 Census of British India and the princely states counted 696,831 rural settlements classified as villages. See *Statistical Abstract for British India—Eighteenth Issue*, Delhi, 1942, Table 1. A dozen is not an impressive sample of this diverse population.
7. C.J. Fuller, 'Misconceiving the Grain Heap', p. 57.
8. Morton Klass, *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*, 1993; repr. Delhi. 1998, p. 132. Emphasis added.
9. Walter C. Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India*, New Haven, 1962, p. 5.
10. Waller C. Neale, in Karl Polanyi, C.M. Arensberg, and H.W. Pearson, eds, *Trade and Market in the Early Empires: Economies in History and Theory*, Glencoe, 1957, p. 226. This formulation is contradicted by much of the rich ethnographic detail in the Wisers' own account of everyday life in Karimpur. See William H. Wiser and Charlotte Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls*, 1963; expanded edition, Berkeley, 2000, pp. 40–3.
11. Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan* [in Hindi], Delhi, 1999, p. 21, my translation. An English translation of this book appeared from Samya, Calcutta, in 2002, and Columbia University Press, 2003.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 18; see also note 34.
13. Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, p. 235. Dumont takes it in as a part of his sweeping analysis of 'Hindu' India: 'It has become common practice

to apply the term “the *jajmani* system” to the system corresponding to the prestations and counter-prestations by which the castes as a whole are bound together in the village, and which is more or less universal in India’ (p. 97).

14. Hiroshi Fukazawa, ‘Rural Servants in the Maharashtrian Village: Demiurgic or Jajmani System?’ *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics* (1972); reprinted in *The Medieval Deccan: Peasants, Social Systems and States*, Delhi, 1991, pp. 198–244.
15. Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, p. 105.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.
17. For a lucid survey of the field of the economics of information, see Joseph Stiglitz, ‘The Contributions of the Economics of Information to Twentieth Century Economics’ *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 115(4), 2000, pp. 1441–78. For a survey of managerial hierarchies and the impact of recent changes in market structures, see N.R. Lamoreaux, D.M.G. Raff, and P. Temin, ‘Beyond Markets and Hierarchies: Toward a New Synthesis of American Business History’, *American Historical Review*, vol. 108(2), 2003, pp. 421–9.
18. A.C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare*, London, 1920, pp. 244–5. For evidence, see Lamoreaux, *et al.*, ‘Beyond Markets’, p. 419.
19. Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus*, p. 104.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 98–9.
21. I allude, of course, to the large multinational corporation with its multiple workplaces and tens of thousands of employees.
22. G.A. Akerlof and R.E. Kranton, ‘Economics and Identity’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 115(3), 2000, pp. 715–53.
23. Wiser, *The Hindu Jajmani System*, p. 108.
24. I classify this as speculative because he has no evidence for the antecedent centuries.
25. Peter Mayer, ‘Inventing Village Tradition: The Late 19th Century Origins of the North Indian “Jajmani” System’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27(2), 1993, esp. pp. 378–86.
26. E.A.H. Blunt, *The Caste System of Northern India*, 1931; rpnt Delhi, 1969, pp. 245–6.
27. Department of Social Welfare, Govt. of India, *Report of the Committee on Customary Rights to Scavenging*, New Delhi, 1966, pp. 2–3.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–12, 20.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 30. ‘Jagir’ was the term used for the exclusive right to clean the latrines of specified houses.
30. Simon Commander, ‘The Jajmani System in North India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 17(2), 1983, pp. 283–311.
31. A much more complete account based on an enormous range of sources was recently published by A.R. Kulkarni, ‘The Maratha Baluta System’, in *idem*, *Maharashtra: Society and Culture*, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 1–62.

- Important new work by other Japanese scholars became available in English in 1997 in Hiroyuki Kotani, ed., *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Delhi, 1997. Very significant historical data supporting my argument is found in Masanori Sato, 'The Chamars of Southeastern Rajasthan A.D. 1650–1800', pp. 30–53; H. Kotani, 'Ati-shudra Castes in the Medieval Deccan', pp. 55–75; and 'Conflict and Controversy over the Mahar Watan', pp. 105–31.
32. Fukazawa, 'Rural Servants', pp. 208–9.
 33. Ibid., *passim*, esp. pp. 238–9.
 34. Ibid., pp. 232–3.
 35. Thomas Coats, 'Account of the Present State of the Township of Lony', *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, vol. 3, 1823, p. 191.
 36. H.H. Mann, *Land and Labour in a Deccan Village I: Pimpla Soudagar*, Bombay, 1917, p. 123; he adds that the real reason for the presence of a Muslim butcher was 'that in the high Maratha families there has crept in, we know not how, a feeling that flesh before being eaten must have been blessed by the *munzawar* or priest of the local Mohamedan saint or *peer*.'
 37. Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Wright, Glencoe, 1950, p. 22.
 38. The consequences of refusal in the early 1950s are vividly described by Omprakash Valmiki. Some Dalits had been refusing unpaid service to their *jajmans*: the latter decided to teach them a lesson. They used the visit of a government employee as a pretext. When the Dalits refused his summons to unpaid labour, two policemen came and rounded up ten of them at random. They were made to squat with their hands holding their ears, and beaten with a bamboo cudgel. 'The sepoy beating them grew exhausted with the effort. The beaten man cried out at each blow.' *Juthan*, pp. 50–1.
 39. W.H. Sykes, 'Special Report on the Statistics of the Dukhun', in *Reports of the Seventh Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, 1837, p. 291.
 40. W.H. Sykes, 'On the Land Tenures of the Dekhan', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 2, 1835, p. 227.
 41. Printed in R.D. Choksey, ed., *Period of Transition (1818–1826)*, Poona, 1945, pp. 202, 204.
 42. Bheel Agent to Collector of Candeish, 30 June 1825, in Maharashtra State Archives, Pune, Deccan Commissioner's Records, vol. 202, doc. no. 1782. Emphasis added.
 43. Appasaheb Pavar, ed., *Tarabaikalitia Kagadpaire—khand palilta*, Kolhapur, 1969, pp. 335–7. The language of this order obviously reflects the way the dispute was presented to Pilaji by the headmen and local gentry.

44. R.V. Oturkar, ed., *Peshvekalin Samajik va Arthik Patravvyavahara*, Pune, 1950, pp. 65–6.
45. W.H. Sykes, 'Special Report', p. 291, p. 292 (emphasis added).
46. Both cases from Oturkar, *Patravvyavahara*, pp. 31–2, 38.
47. L.B. Jagalpure and K.D. Kale, *Sarola Kasar*, Ahmednagar, 1938, p. 385.
48. This special legislation is in itself testimony to the frequency of such conflict.
49. T.N. Atre, *Ganv Gada*, 1915; rpnt. Pune, 1991, pp. 90, 96, 99–102. No less an authority than D.R. Gadgil acknowledged the importance of Atre's book: see his introduction to Dandekar and Jagtap (cited in note 53).
50. D.R. Gadgil, 'Preface' to *Maharashtrachi Gramina Samajtrachna*, p. 3.
51. M.B. Jagtap, *Wai Talukyatil Purva Bhagatil Shell Vatchal*, Pune, 1970, pp. 107–14.
52. Daya Pavar, *Balutam*, 1978; sixth edition, Mumbai, 1995, pp. 56–8.
53. V.M. Dandekar and M.M. Jagtap, *Maharashtrachi Gramina Samajtrachna*, Pune, 1957, pp. 45–70. The comments of one referee compel me to add that these intensive team studies of a scientifically selected sample of villages are significantly more dependable than the assortments of a few villages in various regions at various times from which anthropological models have typically been constructed.
54. Jenkins, *Report on the Territories of the Raja of Nagpur 1927*, Nagpur, Government Press, 1923.
55. British Library, London, Oriental and India Office Collection (henceforth OIOC), Mss Marathi D 35, tbl. 35a.
56. OIOC Mss Marathi D 46 fol. 231 b.
57. Ibid., fol.61b.
58. OIOC Mss Marathi D 44 fol. 118a.
59. Ibid., fol. 108b.
60. Ibid., Account of Chimur Q. 40.
61. Ibid., Account of Umrade Q. 19 and 40.
62. Ibid., Umrade Q. 9.
63. N.G. Chapekar, ed., *Peshvaichya Savlil*, Pune, 1938. pp. 101–14. These records range in time from 1754 to 1825 CE.

Caste as a Social Category and Identity in Colonial Lanka*

JOHN D. ROGERS

In recent years, the scholarly understanding of caste has been transformed by new approaches that treat it as an historical phenomenon rather than a structural feature of Indian or South Asian society. In the older debates, the focus was on establishing caste's 'correct' or 'authentic' form within Indic civilization. In these works, the history of caste since the beginning of British rule was often seen as an anomaly—'real' caste, in its ideal and authentic form, was to be found in the deep past, before colonialism and modernity. Anthropologists and sociologists in the immediate post-war period sought out rural villages where they could document 'traditional' caste before it succumbed to the forces of modernization. Many lively debates ensued, but the participants tended to see caste more as a rather ahistorical key to understanding 'India' than an aspect of social organization that was constantly being reshaped by historical events. In most late twentieth-century scholarship, caste was linked to village or district ritual and economic exchanges, which were often seen as expressions of Hindu values found in classical texts. Distinct regional patterns and modern developments such as caste associations were portrayed as historical deviations from an ideal model.

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The existence of caste throughout Lanka, where Hinduism is largely confined to the northern and eastern districts, was noted by some participants in these debates. Louis Dumont, who linked caste inextricably to Hinduism, used the Lankan case to argue that caste among predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese could not be caste at all.¹ One of Dumont's targets was A.M. Hocart, who made extensive use of Lankan evidence to formulate a general model of caste, which was based on kingship.² Most scholars, however, saw Lankan caste as a pale version of the Indian model. For Sinhalese, the primary difference was identified as the lack of a religious ideology that justified caste. As Patrick Peebles put it, castes in Lanka 'are ranked, endogamous, hereditary named groups with traditional occupations, but there is no religious sanction for the caste hierarchy, and there are no Brahmins to integrate them. They are castes without a caste system.'³ For Tamils, caste was also said to be somewhat weaker than its Indian counterpart, mainly because the few Brahmans in Lanka had little social or economic authority.

The newer and more historical approach to Indian caste is reflected in the recent syntheses by Susan Bayly and Nicholas Dirks, which provide narrative histories of caste from the eighteenth century to the present.⁴ These works see regional and temporal differences in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century South Asian social organization as too marked to be explained by variations from one ideal system. Noting that there was no equivalent in South Asian languages for the term 'caste', which was first used by the Portuguese, they argue that it was under the British that, in Dirks' words, 'caste became a single term capable of systematizing diverse forms of social identity.'⁵ Both writers, however, accept that many of the groups and social practices that came to characterize 'caste' existed before British rule, and that, in some regions at least, Indian society was becoming more 'caste-like' in the eighteenth century. They also accept that notions of collective inequality were widespread, and that this inequality could be expressed in various ways, including political or legal position, differential taxation, dress, food, occupation, religious practice, and marriage customs. Early British accounts of Indian society reflected the diverse social practices found in the subcontinent, using the term 'caste' in different ways and giving it various levels of importance. It is only in the 1860s, with the beginnings of what Dirks calls the

'ethnographic state', that caste, along with religion, became central to an all-India sociology.

This article reassesses caste in Lanka in the light of these new interpretations for India. I argue that before the 1830s both the social practice of Lankan 'caste' and its perception by Europeans fell squarely within the range of regional variation found across South Asia. It was only in the 1830s, when the colonial state in Lanka decided that caste was not a legitimate form of social identification, that the divergence between the island and mainland became marked. The full significance of this change was felt only in the late nineteenth century, when the Indian state employed caste systematically in censuses, customary and criminal law, representative politics, race theory, and many other matters. The absence of caste in official discourse precluded its use in these ways in Lanka, but it did not disappear. Although it often remained in the shadows, caste remained important in social life and elite politics, and was not always ignored by the state. Given the importance that many scholars of India place on nineteenth-century official discourse and policy for understanding identity formation, the Lankan case thus takes on theoretical importance. It serves as a South Asian instance of 'caste' under modern and colonial conditions, but where it was largely absent from state discourse.

Caste in Lanka before the 1830s

Social organization in eighteenth-century Lanka varied considerably by location. A common thread, however, was the presence of 'caste-like' groups. In comparative terms, Lanka appears more caste-like than South Asia as a whole, in part because both of the island states made 'caste' groups central to their administrative structures. Moreover, by contemporary South Asian standards, the population was relatively settled and under effective political control. Although many Lankans travelled in order to make a living, they often did so as part of their state service.

The predominantly Sinhala-speaking southwestern region, which was the richest and most populous, had come under Dutch control in the mid-seventeenth century. The Dutch, like the Portuguese and the Kotte Kingdom before them, used hereditary groups for purposes of labour mobilization, economic organization, and taxation.⁶ The

majority of these groups became known as 'castes' in the nineteenth century, but for administrative purposes the Dutch treated other groups, such as the Moors (Tamil-speaking Muslims), similarly. Although variants of the term 'caste' were employed by the Portuguese and other Europeans from the sixteenth century onwards, the groups covered by this term were variable, and there was little sense that they composed a 'system'. At this time, the European term 'caste' had the same flexibility as Sinhala words such as *jatiya* or *kulaya*, which connoted 'group', 'species', or 'kind'.

The most numerous group in the southwest was the Goyigama ('cultivators'), who probably made up a majority of the population and were considered the highest caste by both the Portuguese and Dutch. Three other important groups were concentrated near the coast and did not have service or ritual relations with the Goyigama. These were the Karava, Durava, and Salagama, whose respective 'natural' occupations were said to be fishing, toddy tapping, and cinnamon peeling. They lived mostly in caste-homogeneous settlements, and their origins lay in immigration from India between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷ This area also had another dozen or so endogamous groups of middling to low status, none of which were very numerous. At the local level many of these groups, such as the Hena ('washers'), had ongoing service relations with other castes, whereby they were expected to carry out certain tasks on a regular basis.

Obligatory government service was connected to caste membership but was not shaped entirely by caste. Some of the functional departments drew on the labour of persons from multiple castes, and others employed only some members of particular castes. The Dutch, like the Portuguese and Kotte states before them, sometimes intervened to change service obligations so that they better met the state's needs. The Salagama serve as a striking example.⁸ Their original 'natural' occupation was weaving, but as cinnamon gained importance first Kotte, then the Portuguese, and finally the Dutch moved them increasingly into this industry. Although some Salagama continued as weavers well into the eighteenth century, by this time their 'natural' occupation had become cinnamon peeling. In this case, the state had a keen interest in caste boundaries. The Dutch devoted much energy to ensuring they had accurate lists of all Salagama men who were eligible for service,

and continuously updated these lists to record deaths, births, and persons reaching adulthood.⁹

The relative power and status of different groups was contested during the centuries before the establishment of British rule. In the late seventeenth century, the Dutch appointed some Karava to positions of territorial authority, with power over village headmen in districts that included villages populated by different castes.¹⁰ By the eighteenth century, despite a suspicion that the Goyigama were less loyal than other castes, the Dutch abandoned this policy, and a newly-emergent Goyigama 'aristocracy' monopolized the territorial posts. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, the aristocracy's power was offset by the Dutch practice of bypassing Goyigama headmen and instead forging direct relations with non-Goyigama caste leaders, who contracted to supply the Dutch with labour and goods.¹¹ Castes that forged direct relations with the Dutch included the Hunu ('lime burners'), who agreed to provide limestone; the Karava, who specialized in transportation and provided labour at ports; and the Durava, whose duties included work in the elephant trade. The most significant of these arrangements, however, was with the Salagama. In the late seventeenth century, the Dutch attempted to force them to gather and process as much cinnamon as possible, relying mainly on coercion, applied through Goyigama officials. Salagama social status was low; the first Dutch governor described them as 'a despised people among the inhabitants'.¹² But in 1708 leading Salagama headmen received the high-status title *mudaliyar*, which replaced their earlier title, *duraya*, which implied low status. Thereafter, the power of Goyigama headmen over the Salagama diminished. The fortunes of the Salagama varied in the first half of the eighteenth century, but after the 1760s the Dutch increasingly treated them as a favoured group in order to encourage their loyalty, and industry. Their headmen received more and more power and their status improved sharply. By the end of Dutch rule, Salagama privileges included exemption from the authority of Goyigama headmen, freedom from tolls at ferries, the right to engage in coastal trade, the free collection of Hambantota salt, and exemption, except for the most serious crimes, from the jurisdiction of ordinary courts.¹³

Other groups also improved their position during the eighteenth century. The Karava in particular, who had also done well during

Portuguese rule, continued to make great economic and social strides.¹⁴ But while both Salagama and Karava leaders sometimes rejected the notion of Goyigama supremacy, they never received from the Dutch the right to display, through dress and retinues, quite the same level of social status as the highest Goyigama officials.¹⁵ Moreover, the Goyigama successfully resisted most attempts to put non-Goyigama in positions of authority over them. In 1746, for instance, the Dutch named a Durava to the post of chief of the Elephant Department, but after protests the appointment was reconfigured so that the Durava official did not have authority over Goyigama workers who also served in this department.¹⁶ While the Dutch exempted some non-Goyigama from Goyigama authority, they rarely placed Goyigamas in a position where they were subservient to other Lankans.

At the local level, service and lower castes were subject to regulations on their dress, on the type of houses they could live in, and on marriage and funeral customs. The Dutch enforced these restrictions, not out of any ideological commitment, but in order to maintain social order. But some groups were dissatisfied. In 1759, for instance, some Hena appealed to the Dutch for the right 'to wear coats and hats for men and stockings for women, and to have the privilege of travelling in palanquins and of using umbrellas.'¹⁷ This plea was made not on behalf of the Hena as a whole, but for a particular community of Hena. It appears that such restrictions were a patchwork of local customs that varied from locality to locality, and which were applied differentially to various communities of the same caste. In other words, the details of sumptuary rules, like the details of service obligations, varied by locality.

In the Tamil-speaking Jaffna peninsula in northern Lanka, which also came under Dutch rule in the seventeenth century, another group of 'cultivators', the Vellalar, was increasingly dominant, despite some Dutch efforts to balance their power with that of other landholding castes.¹⁸ The Vellalar had a firmer grip on the peninsula than the Goyigama did in the southwest. Their power was maintained by government appointments and by the 1707 codification of a 'customary law' for the peninsula, which reflected a Vellalar view of the social order. In Jaffna, as in parts of India, some lower castes acted as servants or 'slaves' of the landholding castes, in return for a notional guarantee of subsistence.¹⁹ This was probably a rather new development; some

castes that were previously in bonded service to the state seem to have become dependent on the Vellalar during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some middle-status groups, including artisans, also participated in Vellalar-centred economic and ritual networks, but other groups such as the Karaiyar ('fishers') were outside these networks, and did not always accept Vellalar claims to superiority. However, the Karaiyar, who like the Karava of the southwest had converted to Christianity in large numbers and had been favoured by the Portuguese, failed to better their economic position in the eighteenth century. It may be that the Dutch did not give them opportunities for mobility because in Jaffna, unlike the southwest, there were other landholding castes, most importantly the Madapalli, that could be used to counterbalance the dominant caste's power.

The Kandyan Kingdom, based in the island's central highlands, remained outside European political control until 1815. Unlike in the southwest or the north, in Kandy the rulers themselves were part of a 'caste-like' entity.²⁰ The ideology of Sinhalese kingship held that kings should be Kshatriya. In the words of H.L. Seneviratne, the king 'had inherent in him a ritually pure caste status, that both justified his kingship and "demanded it of him".'²¹ This idea had contributed to a long history of intermarriage between the Sinhalese and mainland royal families. In 1739, when the king died without a direct heir, his wife's brother, who had been born in southern India, assumed the throne.²² The Nayakkar, as the new royal family came to be known, were an influential community at the court and in Kandy, the capital, but royal power was always dependent on the nobility, which was drawn from a Goyigama subgroup, the Radala. In the Kandyan countryside more generally, as in the southwest, the Goyigama were not only the highest group but the largest one. Except for the Nayakkar and the Vanniar, a regional landholding group found on the northern periphery of the kingdom, the rest of the population was subservient to the Goyigama. Some of these Kandyan groups lived only within the kingdom; others were also found in the southwest. Higher-level territorial appointments were drawn from the Radala, a Goyigama subcaste, and subordinate territorial appointments were filled by other grades of Goyigama.

As in the southwest, most castes had 'natural' occupations, but some service departments were multi-caste, and not all members of a caste performed the same duties. The officials who oversaw these service

responsibilities were not always Goyigama—these appointments were sometimes made from among non-Goyigama groups that provided specialized labour service. Moors, for instance, were sometimes appointed to head the *madige badda*, which was made up of Moors and Karavas, and provided services connected to transportation and trade.²³ None of these non-Goyigama officials, however, had autonomy approaching that achieved by Salagama headmen in the Dutch territories. In general, the labour and service burdens required of non-Goyigamas exceeded those required of Goyigamas.

The general trend within Kandy in the eighteenth century was towards greater political and ritual integration of the kingdom's population. As in some parts of India, there was less room for family or individual mobility in the eighteenth century than there had been in the centuries immediately preceding it.²⁴ Moreover, the power of the Radala aristocracy increased in the late eighteenth century, when it became increasingly common for one person to hold appointments over both territory and service. This centralization of power was also linked to the reconstruction of Kandyan Buddhism in mid-century, which resulted in large grants of land to support religious institutions and a general tightening of the ritual and social order.²⁵ In 1753, a mission was sent to Thailand to bring the necessary number of monks to restore the *upasampada*, or higher ordination. After a brief period when some non-Goyigama monks from the southwest received ordination, the process was confined to the Goyigama.²⁶ This royal decision had importance beyond Kandy, because it was resented by many Karaya, Durava, and Salagama laymen in the Dutch territories, who desired monks of their own caste.²⁷ In 1772, despite Kandyan opposition, an ordination ceremony for non-Goyigama monks was held in the southwest. Kandyan dominance of the sangha was further weakened in 1800 when a number of non-Goyigama monks and novices travelled to Burma, where they held an ordination ceremony that came to mark the beginnings of the Amarapura fraternity. From this point onwards, fissures within the Buddhist sangha followed partially along caste lines, though some Goyigamas joined the Amarapura fraternity, and doctrinal disputes also divided the sangha.

At the village level, the late seventeenth-century account of Kandyan society produced by the British captive, Robert Knox, portrays largely endogamous social groups that were defined through land tenure, service obligations, and differential shares of status, honour, and

power.²⁸ As elsewhere in Lanka, there was no full-scale jajmani system, though in many localities certain groups performed a limited set of services in return for in-kind payments.²⁹ The state enforced rules that governed status, including those concerning the exchange of food, dress, marriage, and other forms of social interaction. As Lorna Dewaraja has observed, the 'length of the lower garment, the right to wear an upper garment, the forms of address, the prefixes and suffixes added to the names were all fixed by social usage.'³⁰ These distinctions applied not only along caste lines, but also within subdivisions of the Goyigama. Except on the kingdom's northern periphery, there is little evidence of caste councils similar to those found in some parts of India. Nor is there evidence that any groups explicitly challenged Goyigama dominance in eighteenth-century Kandy. However, there were many individual violations of caste restrictions, for instance when a woman had sexual relations with a man of lower status. When there were complaints from the woman's family, such incidents were treated as criminal offences, but in their absence these irregularities were sometimes tolerated.³¹

The British took control of the Dutch territories in 1796, and the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815. In both instances, they pursued policies they hoped would reinforce the existing social order. In the southwest, the British decided in 1797 to appoint only Goyigamas to territorial chief headman positions.³² In this instance, the British were following the Dutch precedent, but were more conservative than the Dutch in assigning non-Goyigama officials powers that overrode the territorial administrators. When the British sought information about Lankan social structure, they usually relied on their chief headmen, who naturally promoted Goyigama claims to supremacy. In 1815, for instance, the Collector at Colombo, in response to a query from the Commissioner of Revenue, noted that he had 'spent much time searching the Dutch records, but have found nothing concerning the cingalese casts.'³³ Having failed to find written documentation, he relied on 'the most intelligent and experienced headmen'. The position of leading Goyigama headmen became stronger than it had been in the late eighteenth century, mainly because the British had concluded that they constituted a hereditary feudal aristocracy that had widespread support and respect among the people.³⁴ The British did, however, appoint non-Goyigamas to positions of authority as

clerks, interpreters, translators, and even to high-level administrative positions within the 'native administration'; and caste was not taken into account when the state awarded potentially lucrative contracts to collect taxes or administer monopolies.³⁵

The British, like the Dutch, enforced a system of compulsory service, which in one form or another had been central to the political economy of the southwest for many centuries.³⁶ A minority of the population provided their labour in return for rights to land, but most men were required to work at particular tasks at rates of pay set by the government. While there was a correlation between the 'natural' occupation of a caste and the service required of its members, many individuals were by custom required to do their state service in different fields. The lower classes of almost all castes, sometimes even the Goyigama, could be called upon to carry loads and serve as general labourers. Other Goyigama tasks included administrative work, hunting elephants, and dragging timber. The duties of the Karava, who were often labelled 'fishers' in English-language documents, included rowing boats and serving as carpenters, woodcutters, and coolies. The British, however, devoted the most energy to ensuring that the Salagama performed their duties for the Cinnamon Department.³⁷ They enforced a Dutch regulation that dictated that the offspring of all unions where one parent was Salagama be required to work in the industry, and as late as 1827 they issued a regulation that made it a crime to encourage a Salagama to leave the island.³⁸ The courts heard many cases, some brought by the Cinnamon Department and others brought by Lankans, where the Salagama status of an individual was under dispute.³⁹

In this region, as in most of Lanka, some service castes were by custom required to serve other groups on a regular basis. Although the British sometimes sought to enforce such obligations when they believed them customary, they never collected any information on this subject—magistrates had to judge each case on its own merits.⁴⁰ In 1830, some Panikkis ('barbers') sued some Henas, arguing that they should be compelled to wash their clothes.⁴¹ The Henas replied that the Panikki refused to shave them. In response, the Panikki said they could not shave the Hena because the higher castes would then refuse to employ them, but that they were willing to pay the Hena cash. The judge decided that neither party could be required to serve

the other, but in many places service castes were either willing to continue performing services or local conditions did not give them a choice. Most conflicts took place where a local service caste had gained enough economic and social status to see the performance of their 'traditional' service as irksome or demeaning. An 1830 petition from some Hena stated that 'it is certainly a duty incumbent on all castes of people to serve the Government respectively according to custom, but the practice of compelling one caste to serve another is injurious.'⁴²

The British also ruled upon disputes concerning dress and the display of other public marks of status. James Cordiner, writing in 1807, stated that 'Only certain casts are allowed to wear coats, to carry parasols, or to have servants attending them with umbrellas: and if any person should assume one of these marks of distinction, to which he is not entitled by his birth or office, a mob would immediately surround him, and carry him as a criminal before the nearest magistrate.'⁴³ Most of these conflicts pitted Goyigamas, Karavas, or Duravas against service castes. Many disputes focused on the dress worn by Hena men at formal occasions. An 1816 petition, which protested a Karava official's refusal to sanction a Hena marriage unless the groom took off one of his combs, mentioned two other recent disputes involving Hena ceremonies.⁴⁴ The issue in question was defined by the petitioner as to whether or not he was dressed 'in the ancient custom that is suitable to his cast.' Six years later, in 1822, two Christian Goyigama successfully sued Henas for 'having assumed to put on Ornaments and Dresses contrary to the Usages and Customs of the Country.'⁴⁵ In another case that same year, a Hena sued four men for stripping off the coat he had donned for his marriage, but the court dismissed the case because 'the plaintiff assumed a Dress not consistent with the privileges of his Cast.'⁴⁶ But after around 1825 more and more courts seem to have refused to enforce these restrictions, perhaps because there was no authoritative body of knowledge from which they could judge complaints. In 1829 a petition from Goyigamas and Duravas complained that the low castes had been for the past five years violating custom by 'wearing jackets, gold and silver ornaments, and constructing tiled houses.'⁴⁷

Competition among the higher castes took different forms. Some

non-Goyigamas tried to counteract Goyigama influence on the British view of the social order. A prominent early-nineteenth-century caste propagandist was the Salagama headman, Adrian de Abrew Rajapakse.⁴⁸ He claimed that the Salagama had Brahman origins and that their status was similar to that of the Goyigama, but his campaign had much more effect on missionary and antiquarian accounts of Lankan society than on government policy. Public employment was another site of conflict. Several years after the assumption of British rule, the three Goyigama teachers at a government school attempted to get their Karava colleague dismissed on caste grounds.⁴⁹ Some three decades later, in 1833, the Governor noted that many non-Goyigama in the southwest were equal to the Goyigama in wealth and education, and that these castes believed they had an equal right to public employment.⁵⁰

In Jaffna, the position was somewhat different. In 1806, the British issued a regulation that gave legal force to caste obligations in the peninsula, where distinctions in matters such as the sharing of food and everyday social interaction were more pervasive than in other parts of Lanka.⁵¹ The Governor, Thomas Maitland, stated that the 'right of servitude' possessed by the higher castes was 'on the whole wise in principle and salutary in its effects', because the relationship included an obligation on the part of the higher castes to support the lower ones.⁵² The British also enforced sumptuary rules. Low-caste persons could pay a fee for the right to wear ornaments and use conveyances on formal occasions. The Collector at Jaffna wrote approvingly that the practice 'prevents persons from the inferior casts from infringing on the ceremonies and Distinctions of Respect due only to those of the higher casts.'⁵³

From 1815 to 1833, the British governed Kandy separately from the rest of Lanka. As in the southwest, they continued the system of compulsory labour. They also enforced caste distinctions, including restrictions on dress, as part of their commitment to maintain 'Kandyan law'.⁵⁴ When headmen in Sabaragamuwa complained to the British about a Goyigama woman from near Colombo who was living with a Batgam ('drummer') man, officials entered into a long correspondence to determine not only how such a case would have been handled before 1815, but also what measures would satisfy

high-caste sensibilities.⁵⁵ Another case from Sabaragamuwa, where a Batgam woman was living with a Rodi (outcaste) man, also drew the attention of officials.⁵⁶ In the end they decided to banish her to the southwest, as they could find no village in the Kandyan Provinces that was willing to accept her. There were, however, some circumstances that the British handled differently. In 1821, responding to cases where women had been killed 'under pretense of wiping off a stain occasioned by their having been violated by persons of a different Cast', the law was changed so that these actions were treated like other murders.⁵⁷

Although the British relied mainly on the views of Radala headmen for information about Kandyan social organization, they also made some tentative efforts to establish their own knowledge. John Davy, for instance, included a list of Kandyan castes in a book published in 1821.⁵⁸ His idea of 'caste' was quite similar to the definition that became commonplace across South Asia later in the nineteenth century, but in Lanka in general, as in India, there was no consistency in what groups were labelled as 'castes'. Before the 1830s, almost any group—including those designated as races, nationalities, or religions in other contexts—could be called a 'caste'. The responses to an 1818 circular and the tables found in the 1827 census illustrate how the early British notion of caste was variable.⁵⁹ On both occasions, caste was formulated differently in different districts, and groups such as Moors, Europeans, European Descendants, Burghers, Tamils, Sinhalese, and Descendants of Slaves were found on lists along with the Vellalar, Goyigama, Karava, and other 'castes'. At this time, in both India and Lanka, there were also many inconsistencies in the use of terms such as 'tribe', 'race', 'class', and 'nation'. Colonial sociology was primitive compared to the later efforts to standardize knowledge and objectify identities. When elites divided themselves into categories when petitioning the British, similar inconsistencies in nomenclature were evident.⁶⁰

Early British ideas about 'caste' in Lanka were consistent with their impressions and actions elsewhere in South Asia. The idea that 'caste' was less important in Lanka was a later development, one which followed rather than preceded the changes in government policy of the 1830s. Lankan social organization had its own distinct characteristics, but these differences fell into a range typical of regional differentiation in the subcontinent as a whole.

Lanka and India: The Divergence of Colonial Policy and Rhetoric

In 1832, British policy towards caste moved in a direction quite different from what was to take place in India. On the instructions of the Colonial Secretary, Viscount Goderich, the mercantilist political economy based on the mobilization of compulsory labour was abandoned.⁶¹ Goderich was acting on the advice of the special commissioners, W.M.G. Colebrooke and C.H. Cameron, who had completed an inquiry into the colony's affairs. The change was part of a set of policies known as the Colebrooke–Cameron Reforms, which were designed to bring 'progress' to Lanka along liberal and utilitarian lines; in particular, they sought to change Lanka's political economy from mercantilist to capitalist, in large part by creating a free, flexible, and cheap labour market. From the reformers' viewpoints, if caste was no longer needed for labour organization, it was not needed at all. Colebrooke disliked caste in principle, calling it one of the 'prejudices of the people', and he argued for its non-recognition by the government.⁶² Goderich agreed, noting that the system of compulsory labour was flawed in part because it had required the government to acknowledge caste distinctions. It soon became government policy to not acknowledge caste.⁶³

The new policy met some resistance when it was first proposed. In 1830, Sir Edward Barnes, the Governor, wrote that the commissioners' criticisms were unfair: 'When we talk of caste and privileges arising therefrom we should do well to look a little at home. There are no situations of Headmen in this island hereditary, no such exclusive privilege as appertain to a British peer who is born an hereditary Counsellor of the King and a Member of the Legislature, besides various other privileges.'⁶⁴ Barnes also argued that the government had not been bound by caste distinctions when making headman appointments. He concluded that 'the subject of caste had much better be left to the progressive effect of civilization.'⁶⁵ In London, however, his views were rejected. Colebrooke felt that the headmen are 'in general strongly imbued with the prejudices of Caste', and proposed that future appointments be dependent on a candidate's willingness 'to discountenance the prejudices of the people'.⁶⁶

Although in practice the colonial state never disregarded caste

completely, the normative view that it was undesirable took hold quite quickly among many officials. Many regulations and policies that took explicit note of caste were repealed or ignored. Kandyan criminal law, which included caste slander and took caste into account for determining punishments, was no longer enforced after the 1830s and was abolished formally in 1852.⁶⁷ The government's failure to acknowledge caste became, for many officials and elite Lankans, proof that they were promoting progress. In 1843, for instance, the 22-year-old lawyer, Richard Morgan, who later became the island's Queen Advocate, argued in a debate on the composition of juries that 'the toleration of caste is perfectly incompatible with the enjoyment of free institutions; it is opposed to the fundamental principle of the British constitution which declares that all men are equal.'⁶⁸ In this same year, the jury system that had been in force in the former Dutch territories since 1810 was reformed, so that lists of jurors were drawn up by the juror's choice of language (English, Sinhala, or Tamil) instead of status.⁶⁹ Two years later, in 1845, a government circular ordered that no official should mention caste in any public proceeding.⁷⁰

In India, in contrast, there was never any general attempt by the state to withdraw its recognition of caste. The muddle prevalent in both Lanka and India in the early nineteenth century continued largely unchanged in India until the mid-century, when the British, in Bayly's words, 'significantly expanded and sharpened these [caste] norms and conventions, building many manifestations of caste language and ideology into its structures of authoritative government.'⁷¹ As is well known, British efforts to label, enumerate, and rank castes had important political and social consequences.⁷² In contrast, in Lanka caste was excluded from modern censuses, and it was never used as a formal category in criminal law or in any structures of representative government.

Why did British policy and discourse towards caste diverge so sharply from that in India? One factor was differences in political economy. In Lanka, only a small proportion of the state's revenue came from taxes on land. From the very beginning of British rule, commercial monopolies and indirect taxes, especially levies on the external trade, provided the foundation for the state's finances. When pressures mounted in Britain for liberal and utilitarian policies to be implemented in British territories overseas, in Lanka these policies

had a potential to increase trade and thus the state's coffers. In India, on the other hand, although liberal rhetoric was also employed in the early nineteenth century, the state's revenue was heavily dependent on land taxes that extracted a surplus from farmers. For the British in India, the best way to maintain this flow of revenue was to buttress the established social structure by incorporating and often transforming status distinctions that formed part of the social order. There did not seem to be any immediate benefit from implementing liberal policies in ways that would be likely to reduce, not increase, the state's finances.

The British rejection of caste was also connected to changes in their view of the role of religion, race, and nation in Lankan society and culture.⁷³ When the British objectified 'caste' in India, they configured it, in Dirks' words, 'in direct relationship to "Hinduism" as a systemic, confessional, all-embracing religious identity.'⁷⁴ By the 1830s in Lanka, in contrast, the British had identified the prevalent religion as a Buddhism that did not endorse caste. Colebrooke believed that the Buddhist abolition of caste 'drew on them the hostility of the Brahmins, and produced the religious wars which depopulated the country and led to the settlement of the Malabars in the northern district of the island.'⁷⁵ From the 1830s on, most colonial discourse in Lanka portrayed caste as 'social' or 'national', but not 'religious'.⁷⁶ Since the British always worried that undermining religion might lead to unrest, they felt more free about not supporting caste in Lanka than they did in India. Moreover, in Lanka the place of religion in the emerging colonial sociology was less central than in India.⁷⁷ After all, the 'native aristocracy' of the southwest, who the British saw as natural rulers, were predominantly Christian. The relative lack of emphasis on caste and religion was connected to yet another distinct feature of the new colonial discourse of the 1830s: the British decided that Lankans, unlike Indians, did have a sense of history.⁷⁸ The colonial sociology constructed for Lanka thus differed more fundamentally from Indian models than the mere disavowal of caste. As the nineteenth century progressed, the greater importance of history, nation, and race—and the lesser importance of religion and caste—was taken by many British observers and some middle-class Lankans as indicative of Lanka civilizational superiority compared to India. The journalist John Ferguson encapsulated this general attitude when in 1884 he

noted that Ceylon bore the same relationship to India and the rest of Asia as England did to the European continent.⁷⁹

Social and Political History of Caste under Mature Colonialism

Although caste was largely expunged from official rhetoric, and played a much smaller role in public policy than in India, it did not disappear. Caste identification remained important for many Lankans and continued to be significant in administration and politics, more so than an examination of mere discourse would indicate.

In Kandyan areas ascribed status continued to shape many government appointments. Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond most territorial chief headman positions were filled by the Radala, and the rest were held by other Goyigama or, in the north, Vanniar.⁸⁰ When a new system of rural local government was introduced in the 1870s, the higher appointments were again confined to the Radala.⁸¹ Intermediate-ranking headmen were also drawn from the Goyigama, preferably from families with a tradition of government service. In 1872, for instance, one official rejected an applicant for such a position because he was 'not of good birth, that is, none of his ancestors were headmen under the Kandian kings.'⁸² Non-Goyigama headmen were appointed only for non-Goyigama villages. They were called *durayas*, a term that distinguished them from the *arachchis*, the Goyigama village headmen. Although some non-Goyigama villages prospered in ways that would likely not have been possible before 1832, there was less social mobility in Kandy than elsewhere.⁸³ The main Lankan challengers to Radala supremacy were outsiders, including Sinhalese and Moor immigrants from the southwest, who came to take advantage of economic opportunities connected to the expansion of the plantation economy. Moreover, some government positions, such as the clerks, translators, and administrators, needed for the district headquarters and courts, required education and skills rare among Kandyans of any caste. These posts were filled by men from outside the region, including non-Goyigama Sinhalese and Jaffna Vellalars.

In Jaffna, Vellalar dominance remained strong, and the important territorial posts were filled by members of this caste. Unlike in Kandy, however, the state received many complaints that Vellalar officials

ignored the needs of other groups.⁸⁴ At times the British failed to investigate these allegations because it was felt that the policy of not recognizing caste in public made such action inappropriate. Non-Vellalars were sometimes appointed to non-territorial posts, but these appointments in turn often generated protests from Vellalars, many of whom had taken advantage of the colonial educational system and were well qualified to fill posts in the bureaucracy. In the eighteenth century the Dutch had attempted to limit Vellalar power by appointing headmen from other landholding castes, but the British did not follow this policy with any consistency. In any case, in the course of the nineteenth century these other landholding castes gradually merged with the Vellalar.⁸⁵

In the southwest the social composition of the territorial administration underwent considerable change.⁸⁶ Beginning in the 1840s, a number of Karava Salagama and upwardly-mobile Goyigama were appointed as chief headmen. The 'traditional aristocracy' had to compete with these newcomers, and many Goyigama headmen found themselves under the authority of a Karava or Salagama superior. This development, however, did not lead to the 'fusion of the various classes' that some officials desired in the mid-century.⁸⁷ The 'first-class' Goyigama maintained their social exclusivity, and continued to exercise much influence. In the nineteenth century, virtually all low-country Sinhalese appointees to the Legislative Council and the civil service belonged to this group. Caste also remained important for the new Colombo-centred middle-class that emerged in the nineteenth century.⁸⁸ Non-Goyigama elites did not generally try to hide their caste status. Instead, they denied Goyigama claims to superiority. In the middle of the nineteenth century a number of Karava families from Moratuwa, just south of Colombo, challenged the social position of the leading Goyigama. In 1870s, the most prominent of these families, the de Soysa, was chosen to entertain the visiting Duke of Edinburgh.⁸⁹ Among elites, this triumph was widely perceived as a Karava victory over the Goyigama.

From the 1860s onwards, elites employed print culture to make points about caste. The first extended debate took place in the pages of the *Ceylon Examiner* in 1868.⁹⁰ It began with a number of letters about two pending appointments, one for a Mudaliyar of the Governor's Gate, the highest honorary title other than a knighthood that was

available for a Sinhalese, and the other for a chief headmanship in the southern province. Before the mid-1840s, these posts had been monopolized by Goyigamas, but since that time they had been open to Karavas and Salagamas. Letter writers divided themselves into two sides, one which claimed that the government should appoint Goyigamas because 'you cannot *force* the people to respect a man whom they consider their inferior in social position, however clever he may be', and another which argued both that appointments should be made on merit and that in any case the Goyigama were not, by tradition, really the highest caste.⁹¹ Correspondents soon lost sight of the original appointments at stake, and entered into a more general debate about caste. Their main concern was the relative status of the Goyigama and Karava, though the position of other castes, and reflections on caste in general, also received some attention.

A number of features found in this debate foreshadowed the periodic caste controversies that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹² First, despite the absence of caste from colonial discourse, there was a concern that the British might be fooled by inaccurate information about caste. Many writers on both sides of the debate claimed to oppose all caste distinctions, but argued that it was important that Europeans not be misled by their opponents. In fact, when appointments were pending for positions that had previously been monopolised by the Goyigama, it was impossible for the government not to take caste into account, because 'public opinion' interpreted such appointments in caste terms.

Another feature of the *Examiner* debate that proved to be characteristic of later exchanges was the use of a wide range of historical and etymological evidence. Some writers identified the ancestors of the Goyigama and Karava with particular groups attached to Vijaya, the mythical founder of the Sinhalese kingdom, who was said to have arrived in Lanka more than 2000 years earlier. Other writers appealed to precolonial grammars, chronicles, and other texts. Many correspondents also discussed Portuguese, Dutch, and Kandyan administrative practice. Others quoted British authorities. Correspondents had no trouble finding evidence that supported their cases, or in discrediting the evidence of their opponents. One Karava, for instance, dismissed John Armour's early-nineteenth-century ranking of the Navandanna ('smiths') above the Karava by noting that

he 'had personal reasons for his partiality . . . A woman's influence over a lover is very great.'⁹³

Finally, the *Examiner* correspondents connected Lankan castes to varna categories. One side asserted that the Karava were Kshatriya and the Goyigama Sudra, the other side that the Goyigama were Vaisya and the Karava Sudra. Some letters referred to other contemporary claims, for instance that the Salagama and Hunu were Brahman, and the Oli ('dancers') Kshatriya. Some of these claims, particularly those made by the Salagama and Karava, dated back to before British rule, but it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that the varna status of different castes was used to produce relative rankings.⁹⁴ Earlier claims to Kshatriya or Brahman origins were employed to show that a specific group's status had been higher in the past—they were not used to construct a regional caste hierarchy. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century appeals to varna were influenced by mainland scholarship that made these categories central to Indian social organization. Caste may have been largely erased and deemed irrelevant in public accounts of Lankan society, but the abstract idea of 'caste' was shaped by a wider colonial discourse centred on the mainland. One *Examiner* correspondent cited H.T. Colebrooke's *Essays on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus* as his source for varna, and in later debates some Lankans referred to accounts of caste in Indian government publications.⁹⁵

Caste controversies remained a periodic feature of public life for several decades after the *Examiner* debate. The Goyigama–Karava rivalry remained central, although over time publications appeared that supported the claims of many other castes. Although some publications were in English, most of the writing on caste was in Sinhala. The tone of many exchanges suggests that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century caste controversies cannot be explained only by elite competition for government jobs—many of the participants in these debates felt that deep issues of status and worth were at stake. Sarcasm was sometimes employed. Even in the *Examiner* debate, which was relatively tame in this respect, a Goyigama writer noted that the only way one could support the Karava claim to Kshatriya or warrior status was to follow Darwin's theory and say they had evolved from their assault on fish.⁹⁶

There was often a sense that it was in bad taste to speak openly

about caste, and most polemical works were published anonymously. Other publications were ostensibly not about caste at all. Historical and legal texts were edited and presented in ways that supported one side or the other.⁹⁷ Points were also made in the pages of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*. The scholar Paul Pieris, for instance, published a photograph of a Karava headman's tombstone that bore the image of a fish.⁹⁸ All of Pieris' readers knew that the disavowal of the label 'fisher' was central to Karava claims to high status, and Pieris' contribution prompted a reply that argued the fish was a symbol of royalty.

Another indication of the social strength of caste and of its importance beyond family and locality was its continuing importance for the sangha. In the coastal regions of the southwest, non-Goyigama often worshipped at temples where the monk was of their own caste, and disputes among monks sometimes reflected caste competition. At the island-wide level, sangha organization also reflected caste divisions. The Siyam fraternity, based in Kandy, continued to restrict higher ordination to the Goyigama. The other two major fraternities, both based in the southwest, were multi-caste. Leading monks not only participated in caste controversies, but they did so with the patronage of Christian caste-fellows. Weligama Sri Sumangala, a prominent Karava monk who in 1876 argued that the Karava were Kshatriya and thus superior to the Goyigama, had close ties with the Anglican de Soysa family, who were engaged in a fierce struggle for social status with the mainly Anglican Goyigama 'native aristocracy'.⁹⁹ Similarly, Hikkaduwe Sumangala, a prominent Goyigama monk who rebutted Weligama's work, had earlier helped E.R. Gooneratne, an Anglican member of the aristocracy, write his contribution to the 1868 *Examiner* debate.¹⁰⁰ Such connections are less surprising when one remembers that, at least among cities, family ties were more common and socially acceptable across Buddhist-Christian lines than across caste boundaries.¹⁰¹

Although the role of caste divisions in the sangha was significant, many Buddhist monks and laymen argued that caste was not endorsed by Buddhism.¹⁰² This discourse, along with the liberal colonial one that also rejected caste, made the rhetorical rejection of caste distinctions respectable and contributed to keeping many references to caste rather elliptical. In practice, many monks and other Buddhist

leaders did cooperate across caste lines. Hikkaduwe, for instance, had good relations with the prominent Salagama lay preacher, Migettuvatte Gunananda; and one of his most devoted lay supporters was N.S. Fernando, a Vahumpura ('jaggory makers') businessman.¹⁰³ The identification of the Kandyan Buddhist establishment with the Goyigama, however, was never in doubt. In 1886, when a leading Kandyan monk rebuked Hikkaduwe for supporting the low-country fraternities' position on the proper dress for monks, he accused Hikkaduwe of betraying not only the Siyam fraternity but his Goyigama identity.¹⁰⁴ And at the turn of the century, when Fernando received an honorary title from the government, he was ridiculed by Battaramulle Subhuti, another Siyam fraternity monk and a well-known Goyigama propagandist.¹⁰⁵

In the late nineteenth century, the attitude of some British governors and officials towards caste began to change. In 1859, J. Emerson Tennent, the author of an influential book on Lanka, bemoaned that 'the ascendancy of caste still exercises a baneful influence over the intellectual as well as the material prosperity of the nation.'¹⁰⁶ But there is less liberalism in the 1880 comments of John Douglas, the Auditor-General, who noted that the new system of rural judicial tribunals 'may to some extent be worked for the upholding of caste institutions and prejudices.'¹⁰⁷ Douglas speculated that the tribunals would impose a different punishment on a Goyigama who slapped a Batgam than when the reverse was the case. Douglas continued: 'No doubt this is wrong, but we cannot altogether overlook the deeply ingrained feelings of the native population on this subject according to which a lasting disgrace would be inflicted by the slap in the latter case, none in the former.'¹⁰⁸ The increasing conservatism of many officials may also be seen in the views of E.B. Denham, expressed in 1912: 'However receptive and imitative the Eastern mind may be, it is still under the influence of thousands of years of prejudice . . . Under the British Government every effort has been made to remove the disabilities of caste as far as they affect the public life of the community, but it is not possible—nor is it desirable—to destroy all records of the past.'¹⁰⁹

Arthur Gordon, the Governor from 1833 to 1890, was particularly well known for his conservative views. Encouraged by his Maha Mudaliyar, or head of the 'native administration', Gordon adopted the

pre-1833 view that the Goyigama aristocrat families of the southwest and the Radala of Kandy formed a hereditary nobility, and were the natural rulers of these parts of Lanka.¹¹⁰ Gordon was suspicious of Sinhalese officials who did not have this social background, and discriminated against them when making personnel decisions. Although it was politically impossible for Gordon to express his views openly, they became widely known, and were resented by non-Goyigama elites, particularly the Karava.¹¹¹ There was never any debate on rejecting the principle of non-recognition of caste, but some later governors also saw a reconstituted aristocracy as a useful conservative prop for their rule. Henry McCallum, an early twentieth-century governor who may have been influenced by Lord Curzon's policies in India, placed great emphasis on annual durbars for the low country Kandyan and Jaffna 'chiefs', who were of course required to wear their 'traditional' dress on these occasions.¹¹² McCallum sought to use these men to offset the middle class. Like Gordon, he also favoured the Goyigama when making government appointments.

Gordon's policies accentuated caste controversies among the elite—there was a flurry of caste polemics during his governorship. In the two decades after his departure, Sinhalese representation on the Legislative Council moved to the forefront of politics.¹¹³ Before 1889, the practice had been to appoint only one Sinhalese, and this representative had been drawn from high-status Goyigama families. When the Council was expanded in 1889, provision was made for a second Sinhalese seat, but this was reserved for a Kandyan, who was invariably Radala. Karava and other non-Goyigama elites had since the 1870s expressed dissatisfaction with the Goyigama aristocracy's grip on the most prestigious appointment open to a Sinhalese. In the late nineteenth century, whenever there was a vacancy on the Legislative Council, there were press campaigns that promoted the suitability of various candidates. By 1900, these were supplemented by public meetings. Campaigns generally pitted a 'first-class' Goyigama candidate against one or more non-Goyigama alternatives. But the Karava and other non-Goyigama candidates continued to lose out. Around 1905, Karava politicians increasingly adopted the language of liberalism and advocated introducing the electoral principle for Legislative Council representation. The *Ceylon Standard*, which often spoke for elite Karava interests, stated that the government's non-

recognition of caste was meaningless so long as caste domination was maintained in the Legislative Council.¹¹⁴ The reformers believed that Karava candidates would do well in elections given that the franchise would be restricted by property and educational requirements. The traditional aristocracy, secure in their appointments, resisted this change.

Even though caste was important in elite politics, McCallum was the only governor who spoke openly about it, and even he did so in rather abstract terms. The contrast between government policy in India and Lanka remained sharp. On the mainland, the British used the census to define, count, and even rank individual groups. This information was employed widely, in fields from representative politics to criminal law. In Lanka, on the other hand, caste was never enumerated in any of the modern censuses that begin in 1871. The compiler of the 1891 census noted that caste 'was not included because it is not as important as in India and because it would have led the people to believe it was important, while the "declared policy" of the government is to disregard it'.¹¹⁵ The government did not even have an official list of castes. In 1903, when it revised its glossary of 'native words', castes were listed without their 'traditional' occupations.¹¹⁶

Caste was almost never mentioned in any judicial proceeding, and no legislative or municipal government seats were ever created to represent a particular caste interest. There were few contexts where caste appeared in official records. Around the turn of the century some scattered information on caste was published in a few gazetteers covering some Kandyan districts, but in this region the British were generally content with making a distinction between the Goyigama and the rest, without paying much attention to the specifics of caste identity.¹¹⁷ The only official publication where caste was mentioned on a regular basis was the *Hue and Cry*, a bulletin that was circulated by the police, which named the caste of individuals wanted by the authorities.¹¹⁸ However, unlike in India, caste was never used to identify hereditary criminal groups. Instead, legislation in Lanka followed the metropolitan model and identified 'habitual criminals' on the basis of individual behaviour rather than their membership in a criminal caste or tribe.¹¹⁹

In public discourse, Lankan elites too were often reluctant to place much emphasis on caste. There were no caste associations, though it

was known that some organizations named after particular villages, towns, or interest groups spoke only or primarily for one caste.¹²⁰ They represented their relatively well-off members, and did not attempt to promote the welfare or change the behaviour of ordinary people. Moreover, at the very top of the Colombo elite there was considerable inter-caste mixing at social functions, though the low-country Goyigama aristocracy usually remained aloof. The lack of vertical institutional links along lines of caste raises the question of how far elite conflicts reflected a wider sense of caste solidarity. Patrick Peebles and A.P. Kannangara argue that these disputes were of concern only to a narrow social group at the top of the social order, and had little meaning for the bulk of their caste fellows.¹²¹ They point out that polemicists and politicians concentrated on issues that were of concern to elites who had common class interests, and who used caste to compete for social status. Their argument is by and large convincing, but caste debates may have had some meaning for at least some humbler members of the groups concerned. Although castes did not function as corporate bodies, caste links did play a role in patron–client ties between urban and semi-urban elites and those of lower economic status. In particular, most Colombo-based elite families kept ties with the villages to which they were linked by kinship.

Even though colonial policy makers generally took little notice of caste, it continued to matter in the everyday social life of most Sinhalese. Many people changed their names because, in the words of one official, 'the name is an index of respectability and position.'¹²² This practice was particularly common in towns and among low-country Sinhalese who settled in Kandyan areas. Petitions sent to the government after the 1911 census also point to a concern with caste status.¹²³ One group of villagers, for instance, argued that their hamlet should not have been enumerated separately, but included as part of an adjoining village. Since the hamlet's name implied that it was inhabited by low-caste persons, the villagers feared their sons and daughters would not have trouble finding marriage partners. Another petition was received from an individual who complained that the village *arachchi* had entered his property on the census return under a name that indicated it belonged to a Batgam. The writer claimed that this action was an attempt to disgrace him.

As in the early nineteenth century, higher castes sometimes objected when lower castes acted as if they did not know their place. In 1867, for instance, 48 Karava were arrested at Bentota for stopping a Hena wedding procession that was, in the words of a newspaper correspondent, 'in the modern style'.¹²⁴ Twenty years later, after a man died during a Goyigama attempt to prevent the male members of an Oli wedding party from wearing combs, one official noted that 'these caste distinctions were dying out but recently the high caste people have been attempting to enforce them, even by force if necessary.'¹²⁵ In both the low country and Kandy, marriages or liaisons that violated caste norms could also lead to trouble.¹²⁶ The Rodi in particular were held in widespread abhorrence and contempt. In the 1870s a Kandyan rural council proposed a local law that would have made it a crime for a Rodi woman to come into the presence of a Goyigama when clothed above the waist, and a 1905 commission examining Rodi education concluded that integration was impractical and proposed providing separate instruction.¹²⁷

This violence and conflict did not reflect the major caste cleavages among Sinhalese elites, especially that between the Karava and Goyigama. Most local conflicts over status were between service castes and castes that sought to keep them in their place. Other affrays between castes, which were often set off by economic disputes, seem to have had even less connection with elite concerns.¹²⁸ When caste conflict involved all social classes, it remained a local affair. When it had a wider spatial significance, only elites were involved. The two forms of caste competition usually failed to overlap.

Caste violence was more common in Jaffna than elsewhere, especially around the beginning of the twentieth century.¹²⁹ The point of dispute was often the right of lower castes to wear particular types of dress or to use certain forms of decoration, especially at marriages. In 1902, the Government Agent at Jaffna explained such disturbances as the result of 'Vellalars resenting the adoptions of customs hitherto peculiar to them only, as of wearing jewellery, riding in carriages, using tom-toms at social functions etc., by the low-caste Nalawas and others, who have become rich and decline to follow the old "customs".'¹³⁰ In the nineteenth century, some non-Vellalar from Jaffna worked as labourers in other parts of the island, and accumulated wealth

that would not have been available to them if they had stayed in the peninsula.¹³¹ Not all these disputes pitted the Vellalar against lower castes; there were also conflicts between middling castes, such as the Karaiyar, and low castes. Moreover, sometimes attacks were carried out by low castes who were still allied with the local Vellalars.

Among Sinhalese, the availability of a Buddhist tradition that discounted caste reinforced the viability of the liberal colonial critique. It also made 'modernist' Buddhist activities attractive to upwardly-mobile castes. In Jaffna, in contrast, nineteenth-century Hindu 'modernist' movements were connected closely to Vellalar identity and dominance.¹³² As a result, there was less public space for caste competition. The periodic controversies over the presence of low-caste teachers and students in schools was another indication of the continued intense caste feeling in the peninsula.¹³³ These disputes were fuelled not only by a reluctance to associate with non-Vellalar, but an idea that education was inappropriate for the lower castes. This issue remained prominent as late as the 1930s.

The Vellalar were widely regarded as equivalent to the Goyigama. Indeed, until the mid-century Goyigamas were normally referred to in English by the term 'Vellalar'. It was also quite common to regard the Karaiyar as equivalent to the Karava. A notable example of 'cross-racial' caste rhetoric is a long pamphlet published in 1890 by G.A. Dharmaratna, a Karava lawyer.¹³⁴ Dharmaratna's attack on Goyigama dominance explicitly linked the Goyigama with the Vellalar, and the Karava with the Karaiyar. He portrayed his work as a response to a speech given by Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a prominent and well-born Tamil civil servant who in 1885 had declared to a predominantly Sinhalese audience that the Goyigama was the highest Sinhalese caste.

These cross-racial caste links re-emerged during the first island-wide election, in 1911, for the new 'educated Ceylonese' seat on the Legislative Council.¹³⁵ This pitted Arunachalam's brother, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, against Marcus Fernando, a medical doctor and leading Karava who was trying to become the first non-Goyigama Sinhalese to sit on the Legislative Council. The franchise for this election was drawn narrowly—in the end 2626 votes were cast island-wide. The campaign lasted nearly a year, and public meetings attracted

many people who could not vote. Fernando's supporters spoke the language of liberalism, but Ramanathan's campaign responded with accusations that Fernando represented 'a pernicious caste clique'.¹³⁶ Among the Sinhalese, Fernando received some support from the lower castes and Goyigamas who were on bad terms with Ramanathan's aristocratic supporters, but Ramanathan not only garnered most of the Goyigama vote but also received Salagama support. By this time the Karava elite had become so powerful that many Salagama felt that an alliance with the Goyigama better served their interests. Only about one-third of the electorate was Tamil, but Ramanathan won a decisive victory. This result flew in the face of the dominant British discourse on Lankan society, which consistently emphasized race or nation as superordinate, religion as secondary but significant, and caste as ephemeral.

Conclusion

This article argues that 'caste' in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Lanka fell within the standard range of regional variation found in social organization in South Asia generally, and that British perceptions of caste in Lanka and India were also similar. The history of caste in the two places diverges in the 1830s, when the British in Lanka decided to disregard caste in public. No such decision was taken in India, where caste, along with religion, was in the late nineteenth century objectified and used increasingly in administration and in politics. In Lanka, caste identity remained important in many contexts, but it did not have a significant role in a colonial discourse that justified British power. Nor was it much employed in colonial administration. Caste did, however, continue to serve as a force in social organization and as a mark of status in both middle-class and underclass life.

What broader lessons can be drawn from this comparison between Lanka and India? On the one hand, this account does confirm the point made in much recent scholarship that colonial understandings were central in shaping modern South Asian identities. Present-day differences in standard ideas about caste in Lanka and India are not due to long-standing contrasts in social organization, but can be

traced to the consequences of different decisions about caste that the British took in the early nineteenth century, the so-called 'age of reform'. Although the British administration in Lanka did not escape the late-nineteenth-century colonial desire to build a more scientific knowledge of subject peoples, the absence of caste in Lankan colonial discourse was maintained.

The comparison between Lanka and India does not, however, support the more ambitious claims made by some 'postcolonial' or 'post-Orientalist' scholars. Just because caste faded from Lankan colonial discourse did not mean that it faded from history. Caste continued to play an important role in social life, partly because colonial policy did not always match discourse, and partly because there was a history of caste outside British concerns. There are some quite clear continuities in caste competition and conflict between the periods before and after the radical shift in the colonial discourse on caste that took place in the 1830s. Equally importantly, it is possible to identify 'modern' efforts to assert caste identity that both reflected the new epistemological possibilities of imagined communities, and which ran counter to the dominant colonial discourse on caste, which denied its relevance for Lanka. This suggests that colonial discourse may not have been quite so all-encompassing an assault on South Asian culture as some writers, such as Dirks, suggest. Rather than seeing the modern objectification of identities only as facilitating imperial domination by colonizing the minds of South Asians and enabling the destruction of 'indigenous' notions of 'community', it might be more useful to look at the objectification as part of a process of inserting some ideas of modernity into existing social orders. The new ideas were important not only because they were tools for asserting power, but also because they were effective in resisting power, and because they were able to draw on non-modern (not necessarily anti-modern or even premodern) notions of community in different ways at different times. The modern idea of 'caste', then, may well be an invention, but it is an invention that draws from the past and has been used by all sorts of people for all sorts of purposes at different times. Much the same might be said about almost any other type of modern identity—nation, race, religion, or whatever—not only in Sri Lanka and South Asia, but elsewhere, in both the colonized and non-colonized worlds.

Notes

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6. For general accounts of eighteenth-century social organization in the southwest, see D.A. Kotelawe, 'Some Aspects of Social Change in the South West of Sri Lanka c. 1700–1833', *Social Science Review*, no. 4, 1988; Peebles, *Social Change*, pp. 34–51; and Michael Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation: The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka 1500–1931*, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 75–98.
7. Roberts, *Caste Conflict*, pp. 18–32.
8. C.R. de Silva, 'Sri Lanka in the Early Sixteenth Century: Economic and Social Conditions', in K.M. de Silva, ed., *University of Peradeniya History of Sri Lanka*, vol. 2, Peradeniya, 1995, p. 48; C.R. de Silva, 'Expulsion of the Portuguese from Sri Lanka', in de Silva, *University of Peradeniya History*, vol. 2, pp. 179–80.
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11. Kotelawe, 'Some Aspects of Social Change'.
12. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 67.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

14. Ibid., pp. 75–89.
15. Roberts, *Caste Conflict*, p. 69.
16. Kotelawe, 'Some Aspects of Social Change', p. 64.
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18. S. Arasaratnam, 'Social History of a Dominant Caste Society: The Vellalar of North Ceylon in the 18th Century', *IESHR* (1981), vol. 18.3–4.
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Sitting on the School Verandah

The Ideology and Practice of 'Untouchable' Educational Protest in Late Nineteenth-Century Western India*

PHILIP CONSTABLE

In 1882 the Indian Education Commission affirmed that all government-aided schools should be open to all castes and communities. It stated:

The educational institutions of government are intended by us to be open to all classes and we cannot depart from a principle which is essentially sound and the maintenance of which is of first importance. It is not impossible that in some cases, the enforcement of the principle may be followed by a withdrawal of a portion of the scholars, but it is sufficient to remark that those persons who object to its practical enforcement will be at liberty to withhold their contributions and apply their funds to the formation of schools on a different basis.¹

On the very next pages of the report, however, this affirmation was strongly qualified:

But even in the case of government or board schools, the principle affirmed by us must be applied with caution. It is not desirable for masters or inspectors to endeavour to force on a social change which with judicious

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treatment will be accepted by society. If the low-caste community seek an entrance into the cess school, their rights must be firmly maintained, especially in the secondary institutions where there is no alternative of a special school for them to attend. It is, however, undesirable to urge them to claim a right about which they are themselves indifferent.²

S. Nurullah and J.P. Naik characterized this educational strategy as 'a policy of compromise and slow but persistent attack' on social and religious prejudices on the subject of untouchability, which 'began to show valuable results in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.' They argued that 'once the public realized that threats direct or indirect, would not make government yield on this point, it slowly gave up its opposition and began to accept the presence of untouchable pupils in schools as an inevitable corollary of the new education which they so keenly desired.'³ Nurullah and Naik's emphasis on the role of the colonial government in promoting untouchable education has, however, been substantially modified in subsequent years, and in large part the mantle of promoter of untouchable educational development has been shifted from the colonial government and bestowed on missionary institutions.⁴ In consequence, the role of the 'militant missionary' has become enshrined in many texts as the principal dynamic behind untouchable educational and social change, such as in the works of Duncan Forrester and G.A. Oddie.⁵ More recently, growing recognition of the limitations imposed on missionaries by the Indian social context has led to a qualification of this militancy, such as in the work of Koji Kawashima and Dick Kooiman, and the emphasis has increasingly shifted on to the determination of missionary activities by traditional Indian social and political structures, for example in the works of Susan Bayly and Henriette Bugge.⁶ This article relates in part to this latter perspective and challenges the primacy which earlier analyses have given to Western institutional agency (be it governmental or missionary) as the force behind untouchable educational change in late-nineteenth-century western India. It is argued that the principal agents of the social and educational change experienced by untouchable communities were not by and large colonial officials or even missionaries (although they could at times be supportive), but untouchable Hindus and untouchable Christian converts themselves. In bringing to the forefront this dynamism of untouchable educational

ideology and practice in western India, this article, however, also questions the common emphasis of Bayly, Kooiman, and Bugge that low-caste Hindus used missionary instruction (and conversion) solely to promote their social mobility by Sanskritization, or its replication in Christian 'caste' forms. It is argued in this article that, at times, low-caste Hindus sought to use missionary education (and conversion) to develop indigenous ideologies/protests which aimed at freedom from caste structures, disabilities, and untouchable discrimination. While the arguments of Kooiman, Bayly, and Bugge recognize in varying degrees that low-caste groups incorporated and transcended colonial (missionary) forms for their own purposes, it is argued here that these authors seem to neglect the existence and dynamism of indigenous ideologies for radical social transformation which were also generated in part by this process of incorporation and transcendence.

In elaborating this interpretation of untouchable educational development this article examines the interaction of the four principal groups involved in determining untouchable educational development in the localities of Bombay Presidency in the period between 1880 and 1900 when caste structures and disabilities have been seen to have become increasingly rigid. These four main groups comprise caste Hindu parents and officials of local schools, Protestant Christian missionaries, Bombay government officials, and, most importantly, untouchable parents and activists themselves. The interaction of these groups is analysed principally in three representative cases of educational discrimination on the grounds of untouchability in late-nineteenth-century western India. The first is a case study of a dispute between the Bombay Church Missionary Society in Manmad and the Manmad local board school in Nasik district in 1884–5. It focuses particularly on the ambivalence of many colonial government administrators on untouchable educational rights in the light of the established practice of 'downward filtration of education'. The second case study analyses the violent attempts of the caste Hindu *patel* of Ranjangao Ganpati (Sirur taluka, Pune district) to close down the local American Marathi Mission School in 1880–7, and indicates the growing changes that untouchable use of missionary education could create within rural-caste Hindu society by the late nineteenth century. The third case study is a documentary of untouchable protest to gain access to a government primary school in Dapoli, Ratnagiri district,

in 1892–1901. It emphasizes the growing strength and tenacity of untouchable protest in some areas of Bombay Presidency by the 1890s, and stresses the Hindu–Christian syncretic construction of untouchable ideology, which gave this educational protest its radical dynamism. Finally, within the context of a review of the historiographical literature on government and missionary educational activities in India, it is argued that while some ad hoc alterations of the educational structure by colonial officials gave the semblance of untouchable inclusion in government schools, government ambivalence on untouchable education generally facilitated the continuance of a predominantly caste Hindu construction of education and society in late-nineteenth-century western India. Moreover, it is suggested that while missionaries provided educational institutions for untouchable students, the demand for such institutions was driven by untouchable communities rather than led by radical missionary social agendas. The social protest which emerged from such education, though often supported by missionaries in protection of their (potential) congregations, was largely initiated by untouchables themselves. Although often historiographically characterized as submissive or even ignored in histories of the late nineteenth century, some untouchable groups in western India led an increasingly radical and widespread (although often unsuccessful) challenge in ideological and practical terms to their educational exclusion from government schools and to wider conservative trends in late-nineteenth-century western India.

I

Soon after the Education Commission of 1882, conflict between the Church Missionary Society and the local board school at Manmad in Nasik district in 1884–5 revealed the uncertainty and ambivalence of colonial officials, both in recognizing and controlling educational discrimination against untouchable students. Prior to the Education Commission, there had already been substantial opposition to untouchable education not only from caste Hindu parents and an outraged Indian press, but also from colonial administrators like T.S. Hamilton, District Assistant Collector in Ahmednagar, who, in July 1880, opposed the directive issued by H.P. Jacob, Educational Inspector, North-East Division, that Mahars and Mangs (who were

regarded as untouchables) be admitted to all government schools in the northern division of Bombay Presidency.⁷ Hamilton purported that similar steps should not be taken to admit untouchable students to a school in Rahuri, Ahmednagar district, as it would be offensive to caste Hindus who would withdraw their children, resulting in the closure of the school.⁸ Even the Director of Public Instruction K.M. Chatfield's attitude was more ambivalent than his outward support of Jacob would have led one to suppose. He wrote: 'No order of government will amend matters. It is very desirable not to draw attention to the subject, because the opinions of native society are day by day changing and becoming more liberal and tolerant. And any government order will draw a hard and fast line which will fix the standard beyond which opinion will not attempt to go; whereas if the matter is left to the local committees, the numbers will gradually advance beyond any standards that government could now lay down, without an outcry from the native press.'⁹

Other colonial administrators were more outspoken in their opposition. Like Hamilton in Ahmednagar, the Bombay High Court Judge, West, for example, emphasized to the Education Commission in 1882, 'the impropriety and impolicy of forcing high-caste Hindus and others against their feelings to sit with Dheds and others like them in the same place.'¹⁰ As a result, when the Education Commission stated in 1882 that 'it is not desirable for masters or inspectors to endeavour to force on a social change', it effectively meant that an ambivalence in policy directives and practice was condoned and accepted. As the case of Manmad emphasized in the mid-1880s, the Education Commission had generally done little to make colonial officials more attentive or aware of educational discrimination on the grounds of untouchability or more assertive in taking definitive measures to counter such stigmatization.

In January 1884 the new brahman schoolmaster appointed to the local board vernacular school at Manmad was alleged by Rev. Alfred Mainwaring, Superintendent of the Church Mission Society, Malegaum, to have been encouraging students to abandon the Church Mission Society's Anglo-vernacular school at Manmad in favour of the local board vernacular school, thereby destroying the previously harmonious relations between the schools.¹¹ After visiting the local board school in Manmad, the Deputy Educational Inspector in

Nasik, B.R. Sahasrabuddhe, argued that the new local board school committee had been simply trying to improve the school which had been damaged by the absence of the previous master on locust duty. Moreover, he indicated that only two students had been attracted away from the mission school and not twenty as Mainwaring maintained.¹² As a result, the Educational Inspector of the North-East Division, H.P. Jacob, warned the new master not to deal unfairly with the mission school, while Mainwaring was instructed that parents were free to send their children to whichever school they chose. The conflict in Manmad developed further, however, when, in response to a petition from thirty-five caste Hindus in Manmad in January 1884, Jacob granted permission to the Manmad local board vernacular school to open an English class in direct competition with the Anglo-vernacular mission school.¹³ Mainwaring protested to Jacob in March 1884 that the population of Manmad was only 3786, with a likelihood of only 35 boys being available to learn English, which made a second English class, in addition to the mission's Anglo-vernacular school of 50–60 students, a provocative and unnecessary development. Moreover, Mainwaring indicated that it was strictly against government policy to open a government or local board school/class in the same locality as a state-aided mission school because it duplicated efforts and wasted funds.¹⁴ Jacob concurred with Mainwaring on this interpretation and cancelled the English class.¹⁵

The matter might have rested there if the caste Hindu inhabitants of Manmad had not again petitioned Jacob on 22 March 1885 emphasizing their reasons for wanting a separate English class: namely, that Christian instruction was objectionable to caste Hindus as it allowed untouchable education and untouchables to enter the same classroom as caste Hindu students.¹⁶ Such was the petitioners' objection that the leading Manmad petitioner, Govind Ramakrishna Deo, indicated that they, with support from an influential brahman from Vinchur, would pay Rs 15–20 per month in addition to tuition fees to defray the cost of the new English class.¹⁷ The root of this religious objection to the education of untouchable boys was alleged by Mainwaring to have been almost solely instilled in the Manmad petitioners by the new brahman schoolmaster of the local board school who was supported by funds from Vinchur brahmans outside the local Manmad community.

Rather than seeing the source of the second petition in the direct objection of the Manmad petitioners to untouchable students, Jacob, however, interpreted the purport of the petition as a caste Hindu objection to taking instruction in an alien Christian religion (of which one of many objectionable facets for caste Hindus was untouchable education). In this light, Jacob wrote to Mainwaring that while the particular objection to untouchable students was inadmissible, the general religious issue of objection to Christian instruction in Manmad might be solved by implementing an (unsanctioned) Education Commission proposal to render Christian education 'optional' in missionary schools where the religious conscience of the students and their parents was opposed to Christian teachings.¹⁸ Jacob indicated that if Mainwaring compromised on this point, the caste Hindus of Manmad could have no valid objection to the mission school or a reason for a new English class. Otherwise, Jacob argued, the needs of the caste Hindu community in Manmad were not sufficiently met, and whatever the student numbers available, the government would be justified in allowing a new class or school.¹⁹ Jacob's motives were finding an alternative justification for a separate class in terms of caste Hindu religious objection to Christian instruction, or, more subtly, as a result of his early experience in the 1880s, he sought to remove caste Hindu religious objection to Christian instruction in order to lay bare the untouchable issue at its heart. Mainwaring sought advice from Robert Squire, Secretary to the Church Mission Society in Bombay, but in effect Jacob must have realized that the reply was a foregone conclusion since to render Christian instruction optional in missionary schools was to abjure the very purpose of the missionary educational enterprise itself. Squire sought to return the problem to its original source. He pointed out that Jacob needed to confront the real issue which was the objection of the thirty-five petitioners in Manmad to the presence of Mahar and Mang students in the mission school. Effectively, the government really had to consider the fact that its position in opening a new class would simply be a concession to caste prejudice against untouchable students. In Squire's opinion, caste Hindu arguments of conscientious objection to Christianity were no more than a smokescreen for this discrimination.²⁰ As a result, Jacob requested K.M. Chatfield, Director of Public Instruction, to refer the matter to the Bombay government for consideration.

Chatfield, however, refused to refer the matter for wider government consideration, and decided to sort it out himself. While Jacob had been wrangling with the missionaries for a compromise, the Manmad caste Hindu petitioners, who were still smarting from Jacob's earlier volte face on the new class, had petitioned the Collector of Nasik, W. Woodward, in September 1884. Woodward stated, in contrast to Jacob's vacillation, that while the people of Manmad definitely needed the Education Department to manage their efforts, they merely wanted an English class at their own expense to be attached to the present local board vernacular school (and not a new school itself), and that, therefore, this should be authorized.²¹ Chatfield chose the logic of Woodward's verdict, and on the basis of what he believed to be eighteen years of practical precedent, sanctioned the new English class on the grounds that the government should encourage initiatives in secondary education funded by private sources.²² His appended proviso that the new English class in the local board school in Manmad should not exclude untouchable students was his only recognition of the issue at stake in which his decision clearly favoured the caste Hindu petitioners. Squire again objected that the caste antipathy generated by the new brahman schoolmaster of the local board school could only serve to deprive the mission school of caste Hindu students, leading to the closure of the mission school through loss of its grant-in-aid from the government, and the consequent exclusion of the untouchable students from education as they would not be allowed into the new English class or the local board school, in spite of government policy directives.²³ Chatfield's decision seemed to set a precedent for a widespread attack by orthodox caste Hindus, not only on missionary educational programmes, but also on untouchable educational rights.

Chatfield's decision could not, therefore, go unchallenged by the Church Missionary Society. Mainwaring petitioned Chatfield in a letter which showed such a detailed knowledge of Bombay educational regulations that it clearly angered Chatfield.²⁴ Citing chapter and verse, Mainwaring repeated the Church Mission Society's case against Chatfield's decision to open the new class, namely that government rules did not allow a competing government school/class to be opened against a missionary school where there were insufficient students in a locality. Against Jacob's decision, he reaffirmed his earlier views

that the government could not accept the religious claims of the caste Hindu petitioners against the mission school when they had made no protest in the past. He also indicated that Jacob's ruling was based on an unsanctioned Education Commission proposal on conscientious objection. Above all, he pointed out that the petitioners' essential aims were unacceptable to the government because they sought to exclude untouchable students from education by 'crushing out' their mission school through the secession of the caste Hindu students. Whereas in most cases caste Hindu students abandoned schools when untouchable students were placed in them, in the case of Manmad caste Hindu students had accepted missionary schooling with untouchable students when no other school was available, but seceded and tried to close the missionary school once alternative education under a brahman master was provided. Chatfield was enraged by Mainwaring's challenge to his authority and inverted Mainwaring's legal and moral arguments to his own purpose. He wrote: 'People may differ on the question whether religious teaching should be enforced in mission schools, but no one outside the Committee [of the Church Mission Society, Bombay] can believe it to be right to enforce religious teaching and at the same time deprive [parents] of the chance of educating their children elsewhere.'²⁵

In terse self-justification, Chatwick refused to recognize that he was in effect favouring caste Hindu religious prejudices, and fell back on the argument that not only was it morally wrong to force Christian education on unwilling Hindu students, but also it was well within government regulations to allow the petitioners to improve their local board vernacular school with an English class at their own expense.²⁶

In spite of Chatfield's refusal to refer the matter to the government, a petition from Squire to J.B. Richey, Secretary to Government, brought the matter to the attention of the Governor of Bombay, D.J.M. Reay.²⁷ Reay consulted the government regulations cited by Mainwaring against Chatfield in some detail and sought to bring Jacob's religious argument to reinforce Chatfield's decision. He argued the case for a new class on the basis of a caveat which he found in the regulations to the effect that the refusal of a separate government school/class where there was already an aided mission school was a binding rule only when there were 'no practical difficulties'. He felt, however,

that 'objectionable religious instruction' was a practical difficulty.²⁸ Reay, however, seems to have glimpsed beyond the Christian-Hindu religious controversy and to have perceived the 'caste issue' at its origin. He surmised that the whole issue may have been created and caste sentiments stirred up by the new schoolmaster's attempts in Manmad to increase his student numbers. He, therefore, qualified his judgement by advising a test of the caste Hindu petitioners' conviction for the new class by making the petitioners pay fully for the new class, while preventing any students who had previously accepted missionary education from changing to this new class. Meanwhile, untouchable children were to be allowed to enter the new English class if it was under government management.²⁹ These qualifications in the Governor's proposal seemed to reflect further the ambiguity of the Education Commission's policy directives on untouchable education, but his qualifications were largely lost in the Education Department resolution issued on 2 March 1885 which voiced entirely a combination of Chatfield's position on private educational finance and Jacob's religious justification for the new class on the basis of conscientious objection.³⁰

In response, as Squire endeavoured to point out for a third time, the only 'practical difficulty' was that the Bombay government seemed to wish to misconstrue or ignore the cause of the case. The issue, for the people of Manmad, was not Christian religious instruction per se, which they had accepted for several years, but the attendance of untouchable boys in the mission school: 'the caste question is the real religious question, religious objection and caste are the same issue.' Squire continued to indicate that the government, by favouring a small minority in Manmad with a new class on the grounds of 'religious objection' or private finance, missed the point of the debate which was the objection of caste Hindus to untouchable students. By its interpretation of the Indian Education Commission's policy, the government was allowing caste Hindu discrimination. Now that the class had, however, been authorized by the government on 2 March 1885, Squire indicated that, at the very least, if there was to be a separate class in Manmad which was based on objection to untouchable students, it could not be a government or local board class (as this contravened government rules which refused government aid to schools/classes that did not admit untouchable students). It had

to be in the form of a private class under private management and funding (which could set its own rules).³¹ Jacob too had suffered a slight change of heart now that the caste Hindu petitioners had secured their class. He too stressed that the attachment of the English class to a local board school gave it governmental prestige (while being a private class). It would, therefore, be more equitable to the mission school to establish the class as a separately managed and funded school, with a right to apply for a government grant-in-aid, like the mission school, if it did not exclude untouchable students.³² These arguments on the nature of the new class/school were also intensified by the replacement of Chatfield (on leave) by W. Lee-Warner, as Acting Director of Public Instruction. Lee-Warner was known for his sympathy for the education of lower castes, and in controversion of Chatfield's decision he backed the position which Squire and Jacob had finally reached regarding the private and non-governmental nature of the new class.³³ The Governor-in-Council, however, summarily dismissed Lee-Warner's suggestion as further obfuscation. He pointed out that Lee-Warner had failed to see the pressure that was being put on the caste Hindu community to accept mission schools, and that, in the process, Lee-Warner had departed from the principles of government neutrality in religious matters.³⁴ Where Lee-Warner's proposal had at least sought to strike a balance, Reay seemed to favour the rights of the caste Hindu community in Manmad in contravention of the very principles of neutrality in religious matters which he himself advocated.

When the Church Mission Society, Free Church of Scotland Mission, Methodist Episcopal Church, and the American Marathi Mission jointly petitioned the Government of India in August 1885, the Government of Bombay found itself in a difficult situation.³⁵ Reay, Governor of Bombay, marginalized the untouchable discrimination, which was the source of the case, and excluded Lee-Warner's solutions from the papers. Rather, he emphasized Chatfield's and Jacob's earlier arguments that the Bombay government was bound to accept financial gifts from benefactors for education, especially if they prevented students from being forced into mission schools against their consciences.³⁶ On the basis of the evidence presented, the Governor-General came to agree with the Government of Bombay's actions in opening the new class. They insisted, however, that the class could not be attached to the local board school and had to become

a separate private school, which, ironically, was exactly Squire's and Lee-Warner's previous suggestion.³⁷ The missionary victory was, nonetheless, mixed. They had ultimately been forced into accepting the opening of an English school, but it was opened on the terms that Squire and Lee-Warner had suggested: that is as a self-funded and private institution, competing (if it admitted untouchable students) for a grant-in-aid on equal terms with the missionary school. They, nonetheless, lost the argument on the question of religious education and conscientious objection. Above all, however, their consistent and principal contention that the new school/class should not be opened as its formation was based on discrimination against untouchable students was almost completely neglected in favour of a policy which, in spite of the Bombay government's statements about untouchable welfare, upheld, first and foremost, caste Hindu perceptions and needs. Such ambivalent official attitudes clearly did not allow for a 'persistent attack' on social and religious prejudices regarding untouchability. At best they reflected a failure to recognize discrimination on the grounds of untouchability, and at worst they seemed to suggest a belief in the superior merits of caste Hindu education and a search for convenient administrative solutions within which to accommodate caste Hindu values and perspectives.

The reasons behind this official failure to promote untouchable education in this period were essentially twofold; one pragmatic, the other ideological. The Collector of Ratnagiri, W.W. Drew, provided the pragmatic reason in explaining his failure to include untouchable students in school classrooms in Ratnagiri, Thana and Kolaba districts in the 1880s and 1890s. He stated: 'I found it was no use trying to get [the exclusion] remedied, because the educational authorities are against anything that might endanger the number of pupils on their books, which an order that the low-caste boys were to be admitted into the same room as the others would certainly do.'³⁸

The same situation had certainly been experienced by Jacob due to his acceptance of untouchable education in 1880. Local officials like Drew and Jacob found themselves faced with the insoluble dilemma of having to maintain school and student numbers while recognising the right of untouchable students to enter a school with the inevitable consequence of the withdrawal of its caste Hindu students. The dilemma of local officials was openly recognized in the

Bombay press. The *Native Opinion*, for example, wrote in 1882: 'The extension of education downwards is very much retarded by want of funds. Every deputy inspector is expected to show an increase in the numbers of schools and scholars in the district, while the grant remains fixed . . . It would, we dare say, rudely shake the comfortable notions of our government about the so-called progress of our schools, if some honest deputy inspectors let them into the secrets of their administration.'³⁹ As a result, government officials, as in Manmad, often took the line of least resistance, which was to overlook, to leave unchallenged, or to find administrative compromises to educational discrimination against untouchable students, although this was a compromise which often favoured caste Hindu values and society. Many officials seem simply to have turned a blind eye or to have been unaware of caste Hindu exclusion of untouchable students. Thus, at Revdanda village in Kolaba district in July 1893, the caste Hindu villagers intimidated and persecuted the parents of two Mahar boys sent to the local school until they withdrew the children. The untouchable villagers petitioned the Collector of Kolaba to order the Superintendent of Police and *mamletdar* of the taluka to re-admit the boys to the school and end the intimidation of the parents. The Mahar petitioners, moreover, particularly pointed out that both the Deputy Collector and the *mamletdar* had actually been in Revdanda on the day the Mahar boys were removed from the school, but had not appeared to have heard of the exclusion.⁴⁰ Other government officials simply seemed to allow what they saw as inevitable under the circumstances. In 1893, for example, the Educational Inspector, Northern Division, E. Giles, stated in relation to untouchable attempts to enter Ahmedabad schools that 'to place untouchable, students in a school was effectively to empty that school of caste Hindu students, and that neither Educational Department, Collector or even the Government of India could alter this situation by mere order or regulation. The only hope was that higher caste education over time would remove the prejudice.'⁴¹

A second cause of failure was the ideological perspective of some officials which demonstrated a clear moral preference for caste Hindu villagers over the educational aspirations of untouchable students. These perceptions were reflected in the views of Giles who intimated at a negligent untouchable attitude to education, only partly determined

by poverty: 'These Dheds, Bhangis, Chamars and Khalpa are most indifferent to education, that even when the children come to school, they rarely remain there any time, their attendance is usually most irregular. They see no benefit in education . . . and the problem of life is with them so pressing that parents cannot afford to lose the earnings of children so soon as they are able to earn anything.'⁴² Others, like P.C.H. Snow, Assistant Collector of Pune, were critical of untouchable labourers who rose above their menial village status. Like in many cases in Ahmednagar district in the 1880s, Snow claimed that:

Soon after a missionary school is set up for the Mahars in a village, they affect a sort of independence and self-sufficiency, and decline to carry out the legitimate orders of the village officers. An intolerable friction ensues at once as the village officers generally proceed to cut off their *haqs*, and occasionally are so incensed with their proceedings as to incite the Mangs to attack them. That the village officers are placed in an awkward position cannot be denied. The slightest proceeding on their part, is reported as *zulum* and carried to the missionary to whom the Mahars look for all sorts of benefits. Thence the complaint finds its way to the collector. It must be borne in mind that the patel in these cases has little power of resistance even if in the right. The missionary is sure to believe the words of his own converts and unless the district authorities take a different view of the matter, the Patel must go to the wall.⁴³

Not only did Snow's sympathies lie with the caste Hindu village officials, he also had a very low opinion of Mahar character: 'I have never met a more mendacious and unreliable set of men than the Christian Mahars. No falsehood or exaggeration seems too great for them: in giving up their own creed, they seem to relinquish at the same time all the moral restraint which before kept them within bounds.'⁴⁴

Such negative views of untouchables were in part a consequence of educational strategies transposed to western India from the British context. As David Newsome has indicated, British educationalists like Thomas Arnold had fashioned widely influential educational theories which interrelated 'good learning' and 'godliness'. Education (good learning) was a 'system of instruction towards moral perfection' (godliness) of the individual, with this moral perfection defined in terms of Victorian middle-class values.⁴⁵ It was a short step for educationalists in India like Chatfield to conceptualize the same qualities

in the higher 'godly and learned' brahman/*jatis*. As E.H. Gumperz and Ellen McDonald have shown, educational policy in western India in the nineteenth century had been aimed largely at educating higher castes in such principles in the vague hope that this education would filter down to the lower castes and gradually reform Hindu society in the process.⁴⁶ Nurullah and Naik see the Wood Despatch of 1854 as the 'death blow' to this failed policy of downward educational filtration, and they envisage the Education Commission in 1882 as the implementation of a distinct compromise for the integration of untouchable students into the caste Hindu-dominated educational and social structure.⁴⁷ Events in the 1880s, like those in Manmad and elsewhere, however, suggest that in practice discrimination against untouchable students continued to be the rule, and 'godliness and good learning' were largely seen by colonial administrators to be the prerogative of the higher *jatis*.

'British officers', wrote Lee-Warner, Commissioner, Southern Division, in 1887, in comments on untouchable education, 'have, I regret to say, withstood this natural and healthy movement.'⁴⁸ In the 1880s, Lee-Warner belonged to a minority of officials holding sympathetic views towards low-caste and untouchable education. As Acting Director of Public Instruction during Chatfield's absence in late 1885, Lee-Warner was subjected to a personal tirade of criticism from the Sarvajanik Sabha and much of the Bombay Presidency press for his educational circular of 22 August 1885 limiting half of Bombay Presidency's free studentships in high schools to the lower *jatis*.⁴⁹ In publicly venting the Sarvajanik Sabha's less than disinterested accusations that he was actively promoting *jati* divisions and anti-brahmanism in education, Lee-Warner indicated that his purpose was merely to prevent brahman *jatis* from monopolizing free studentships (such as in the Deccan where 122 of 155 free studentships were held by brahman boys in 1885), and thereby establishing a more equitable distribution of educational resources.⁵⁰ In private correspondence, however, Lee-Warner's sympathy for the education of the lower *jatis* was also tempered with a certain *raison d'état*. He wrote:

During the past twenty years we have parted with the European props which support the roof [of British rule] . . . We have turned our deputy collectors into native officers, reduced our European inspectors and schoolmasters, and while we have lost all these influential British subordinates, their places in the Dekhan mostly have been filled by brahmans.

The remedy is to look to the foundations of our administration and either underpin them with European agency or (as seems to me the best course at present) secure subordinates from the non-brahman classes, the Marathas of the non-sacerdotal castes, the Mahomedans, the Europeans, 'Natives of India' and others . . . If we do not loosen the power in the administration which the Poona brahmans have acquired, we must expect strikes and difficulties. Scholarships should be given to help the backward classes, and we should educate the men we want for the public service . . . [the brahmans] caste and sacerdotal pretensions must make them opposed to British rule conducted on liberal lines of freedom and equality.⁵¹

The 'liberal' nature of Lee-Warner's initiative in 1885 did, however, find much support among the Satya Shodhak Samaj and missionary establishments.⁵² Rev. Smith of the American Marathi Mission in Ahmednagar memorialized the Bombay government on the benefits of such an educational strategy in January 1886, and on his return, Chatfield, after stemming brahman criticism by abolishing all free studentships in 1888, revived, in part, Lee-Warner's policy in 1892 by reinventing free studentships solely for the 'backward classes'.⁵³ Lee-Warner's directive was, however, largely of benefit to caste Hindu non-brahmans, not untouchables. Nonetheless, by the latter part of the 1880s, sections of the Bombay Presidency press were also beginning to advise the Bombay government that it was time to move away from their confused and ambivalent policy on untouchable education as embodied in the Education Commission's directives, and to effect, if not a radical change, at least a clear stance on untouchable education.⁵⁴ Suggestions slowly turned to open criticism from newspapers like the *Indian Spectator* in 1890:

It is very hard on the so-called low castes in India that though in theory they are equally eligible with all classes of Her Majesty's subjects for the benefits conferred by a civilized government, they should be practically debarred from most of these by being treated at school as something less than ordinary schoolboys . . . We have heard brahman friends say that the upper classes would try to meet the requirements of the case. This offer of a compromise compares favourably with the position of government that professes to be guided by principles of equality, but is not. If this sneaking partiality is tolerated long enough, we should not be surprised to hear a High Court Judge declining to do equal justice as between a brahman and a shudra, simply because the former is pleased to look on the latter as low-born.⁵⁵

In spite of increasing criticism, however, the 'sneaking partiality' continued. Indeed, Lee-Warner's advocacy of untouchable educational rights in the late 1880s brought a cautious response from the Bombay government. He wrote: 'As I have reason to believe that the opponents of education and of the equal rights of man are at present active, I further recommend that government call attention to the despatch of Her Majesty's government and direct the collectors of Poona, Satara and Ahmednagar to warn village officers that it is their duty to assist and promote all efforts to educate the people, which are acknowledged by grants-in-aid from government.'⁵⁶ The Governor of Bombay, D.J.M. Reay, was quick to point out to Lee-Warner that he should not go around proclaiming the 'equal rights of man' in India. Lee-Warner suggested that what he had meant was 'the equal rights of all castes to education and protection of the law'. Advocacy and promotion of untouchable educational rights clearly perturbed the Bombay government as much as it troubled local British administrators in western India. T.D. Mackenzie, Secretary to the Governor of Bombay, stated the position at the end of the 1880s in words which showed little change from similar statements by K.M. Chatfield at the beginning of the 1880s: 'Given religious prejudice, it is preferable to await the effects of education, time and the railways to remove prejudices, rather than threaten patels with penalties, if they do not actively promote Mahar education. They should be encouraged to promote the education of all, but to force them into this will only make the business more hateful to them . . . Caste must be reduced further by railways and education before Mr Lee-Warner's suggestions are implemented.'⁵⁷

II

Whereas the ambivalent practice of colonial administrators in the educational development of untouchables in western India generally served in the 1880s to perpetuate the educational dominance of a caste Hindu elite and the continuance of a downward filtration theory of educational development, Scottish Presbyterian and American Marathi missionaries in western India, on the other hand, had adopted a policy of equal rights for all castes and communities in their schools. As the Manmad case in 1884 indicated, missionary pressure from institutions like the Church Mission Society in Nasik was motivated by the missionaries' wish to use their institutions to educate/convert all castes

of Hindus to Christianity and to prevent the colonial government from using them simply as a place to despatch 'troublesome' untouchable students, who, if admitted to government schools, would have emptied them of caste Hindus.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the perceived parallels, between low-caste untouchable *bhakti* beliefs and Protestant Christian doctrines had also made Protestant missionaries feel that there was particular potential for conversion through education of the lower and untouchable *jatis*.⁵⁹ By the 1880s, the Church Mission Society was influential in Nasik, the efforts of the Free Church of Scotland were extensive among the untouchable communities of Pune and Bombay, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel was working in Ratnagiri; and American Marathi Mission schools were promoting untouchable instruction in Bombay, Pune, Ahmednagar, and Satara. As the Assistant District Collector of Satara, Fry, commented: 'Low-caste boys have an excellent opportunity for education wherever any of the schools of the American Marathi Mission are found. Among the best in this charge are those . . . in Satara taluka . . . in the Wai taluka . . . and in the Koregaon taluka.'⁶⁰ The consequence of such an association between potential untouchable converts and non-conformist Protestant missionaries was not only to render the missionaries a major support for untouchable protest, but also to make them together a strong pressure group in compelling the Bombay government into a slow reappraisal of its attitude to untouchable education in government schools in the late nineteenth century.

Pursuit of the educational rights of untouchable Hindus, and particularly of untouchable Christian converts, had long been laid conspiratorially by both caste Hindus and government administrators at the hands of missionaries from as early as the 1850s. For example, when Jotirao Phule established his first low-caste schools in Pune between 1848 and 1852 and placed them under a managing committee—The Society for the Promotion of the Education of Mahars and Mangs—in 1852, it was emphasized that he was influenced by the activities of the Free Church of Scotland and the American Marathi Missions.⁶¹ Likewise, in July 1850, the government vernacular school in Dhulia, Khandesh district, had refused to admit a Mang Christian convert. The school board stated that if a Christian convert or a Mang or Mahar applied for admission, they would find it difficult to vote for exclusion, but felt the 'expediency on questions of this kind of not bringing on

such discussions.' J. Bazett, the Dhulia Court Judge, adjudicated, however, that there was no educational rule to justify the exclusion. Bazett was known for his missionary sympathies and his connection with the evangelical, David Davidson.⁶² In June 1856 another petition was made to the Bombay government by a Christian Mahar convert who had been refused entry to the government school at Dharwar. Missionaries were again seen to be behind the petition. This exclusion occurred in direct contradiction of the Wood Despatch of 1854 which, as a result of increasing missionary pressure over low-caste and untouchable education, had prohibited the exclusion of any student from publicly-funded schools on caste grounds. The Bombay Board of Education stated, however, that 'it would not be right for the sake of a single individual, the only Mahar who has ever yet come forward to beg for admission into a school attended only by pupils of caste, to force him into association with them at the probable risk of making the institution practically useless to the great mass of Indians.'⁶³

In spite of this opposition, or at best ambivalence, of colonial administrators, some individual instances of untouchables securing educational rights nonetheless began to emerge in the early 1880s as a result of untouchable and missionary pressure on the government. The Educational Inspector, North-East Division, H.P. Jacob issued a circular in 1880 suggesting the schoolmasters admit untouchable students.⁶⁴ In response, eight schools in Kolaba district—at Dabhan, Karamsad, Alindra Patel, and Samarkha—were boycotted by caste Hindus. At the girls' school at Nadiad, when two untouchable girls requested admittance, they were immediately 'excused attendance' until further instructions could be obtained from Jacob. The general belief in Nadiad and Dabhan was that a conspiracy was being perpetrated by Presbyterian missionaries who were sending untouchable Christian converts for admission to government schools. Unlike the complete exclusion of the 1860s and 1870s, however, Jacob determined that the untouchable girls in Nadiad should be segregated on the school verandah, and if the caste Hindu students failed to attend notwithstanding this separation, then the latter were to be excluded from other schools. As a result of this policy, most of the schools in Kolaba district reopened by mid-November 1880, with the exception of the deserted 200-pupil school of Karamsad, where the parents refused to relent in their opposition to the admission of one

untouchable boy. In response, Jacob closed the school, transferred the masters and ordered that the absent students were not to be admitted to any other school in the area.⁶⁵

In the central and southern divisions, a similar compromise using the verandah was adopted when, on 6 March 1882, Yeshwantrao Raoji Tolmatti sent a petition to the Education Department on behalf of the high-caste Hindu residents of Dharwar requesting the rescinding of the order admitting two Christian Mahar converts to Dharwar high school. The Director of Public Instruction, Chatfield, replied that if the boys were separated away from the caste Hindu children, there was no reason to expel them, because (as explicitly emphasized in the Education Commission report), unlike primary education where alternatives might be available, they could not receive a secondary education elsewhere.⁶⁶ In consequence, the inhabitants of Dharwar (like Manmad) attempted to start a private English school, although without a government grant-in-aid the venture proved difficult to sustain.⁶⁷ Likewise in Waduth in Satara district in 1887, the local caste Hindu schoolmaster was reported to the government by Rev. Bruce and fined Rs 3 by the Education Department for denying Mahar Christian converts entry to the school which was located in his own house.⁶⁸ The most prominent case, however, in revealing the growing challenge that untouchable education with missionary support was beginning to pose to village social structures was that of the persistent attempts by the villagers *patel*, Bapu Bin Babaji, and the *kulkarni*, Ganesh Bhivarao, to close the American Marathi Mission School in Ranjangao Ganpati (Sirur taluka, Pune district) between 1880 and 1889.⁶⁹

Bapu Bin Babaji was appointed as *patel* of Ranjangao for life in 1859 on an emolument of Rs 89 per annum.⁷⁰ There had been no recorded difficulties in Ranjangao until the establishment by Rev. R. Winsor of the American Marathi Mission School in the village in 1879 under the charge of two Indian teachers/catechists, Jesuba Bhagoba and John Salar. The average attendance in the school in the 1880s 'was about 16 students', most of whom were Mahars (with some Marathas), but the school did not register for a grant-in-aid until 1886.⁷¹ In October 1880, the *patel* of Ranjangao, Bapu Bin Babaji, and the *kulkarni*, Ganesh Bhivarao, forcibly closed down the American Marathi Mission School, and intimidated the Mahar

students and Indian missionary teachers. Although Bapu Bin Babaji and Ganesh Bhivarao denied the charges, they were suspended from their offices as a result of a contradictory statement of apology for closing the school provided by their lawyers. After five months they were reinstated by the new Collector of Ahmednagar, Moore, in March 1881.⁷² In spite of threats of dismissal, the *patel*, Bapu Bin Babaji, again forcibly closed down the American Marathi Mission School on 12 January 1887 and threatened the property and personal safety of the Mahar families, particularly seven Mahars—Rasu and Sidu Ranu, Dhondiba Dharu, Sakharam Anant, Dhondiba Limbji, Ranu Andoba and Dhondi Rakhmaji—and their two Indian Christian teachers—Jesuba Bhagoba and John Salar. Two Maratha non-brahman families of Bahadur Kasiba and Ganpat Bapuji were also expelled from the school.⁷³ On complaints from these families and their Indian missionary teachers to Rev. R. Winsor, Winsor wrote to W.A. East, Collector of Pune, who despatched P.C.H. Snow, second Assistant Collector of Pune, to conduct an enquiry on 1 February 1887. Snow found a situation of tension which had been simmering in Ranjangao between high-caste Hindus and the untouchable Mahars since the *patel's* dismissal and reinstatement in the early 1880s. The *patel* had finally been driven by the Mahars to lose his temper and act, in Snow's words, 'in a most violent, headstrong and foolish manner.'⁷⁴ Snow's adjudication, however, placed all the responsibility for events on the Mahars. He felt that missionary influence had led them to affect an independence and self-sufficiency which caused them to be insubordinate in their ordinary village duties. As happened commonly in Ahmednagar, Snow argued, the village officers then retaliated by withdrawing Mahar/Mang village rights, which was sufficient to incite the Mahars and Mangs to violence against them. Although the *patel*, Bapu Bin Babaji, should have complained to the *mamletdar*, Snow felt that his frustration was comprehensible, especially since Mahars in general, in becoming Christian, seemed to lose all moral restraints.⁷⁵ On Snow's advice, the Collector of Poona, W.A. East, cautioned the *patel*, ordered the school to be reopened, dismissed Mahar fears of violence as exaggerated, and placed the blame for events squarely on Winsor and his Indian catechists. In particular, he cautioned Winsor and his teachers from interfering further in village affairs between the *patel* and village servants, and exhorted him to

exercise control over his congregation.⁷⁶ This decision was effectively a blow to missionary authority and, like Manmad in 1884–5, was seen as colonial administrative recognition of the authority of the caste Hindu villagers.

In his letter to D.J.M. Reay, Governor of Bombay, on 20 June 1887, complaining against East's decision, Winsor provided insight into the alternative experience of the Mahar untouchable petitioners in 'Ranjangao'. According to the evidence that Winsor derived from the untouchable families, Bapu Bin Babaji had close connections with the head clerk in the collector's office.⁷⁷ This connection had allegedly paved the way for Bapu Bin Babaji's rapid reinstatement as *patel* after five months of suspension in March 1881, when Moore replaced Campbell as Collector of Ahmednagar.⁷⁸ In the illegal closure of the mission school on 12 January 1887, Winsor alleged that the clerk had also played a facilitatory role. The *patel* closed the school on 12 January 1887, presumably having been informed that when the Deputy Educational Inspector came to visit the school on 3 February, he would record its closure and sanction the withdrawal of its recently awarded grant-in-aid.⁷⁹ The untouchable families alleged that on the night before the Assistant Collector of Poona, P.C.H. Snow, took evidence in Ranjangao, Bapu Bin Babaji feasted the clerk, who subsequently distorted the evidence taken by Snow and fabricated false charges against the Mahars in the Collector's office. Moreover, Bapu Bin Babaji was alleged to have received, through the same clerk, a copy of the letter sent by the Collector of Poona, W.A. East to Rev. Winsor on 5 February 1885, which conveyed Snow's sentiments that Winsor was to blame for events in Ranjangao and that he should desist from interfering in village affairs. The untouchable families alleged that Bapu Bin Babaji then used the letter to intimidate them further by citing his power to prevent them from seeking assistance from the government, and encouraged them to throw out the mission altogether.⁸⁰ Snow and East seem to have been misled in their evidence collection and conclusions, although further investigation did not produce any evidence of collusion in their office.

As in the Manmad case, it was the Educational Inspector, Southern Division, W. Lee-Warner, who seemed to provide a solution to the problem by pointing out that neither Snow nor East had evidence of or had even mentioned a specific action of disobedience by the

Mahars. The problem was essentially that education, such as that of the missionaries in Ranjangao, was creating a realisation among untouchable villagers that, in Lee-Warner's words: 'They can now sell the labour of their hands and are not bound to sit at home and work the customary service . . . without receiving the customary perquisites. . . . The system in force in many villages of compelling Mahars and others to stay at home is a device suggested by a specious pretence of precaution against crime, but is really proposed by the village officers to suppress movement towards the emancipation of labour.'⁸¹ Lee-Warner elicited strong protest from Snow and East for his additional comments that they should remind village officers of their duty to 'promote' every effort to educate all castes of students in schools assisted by the government, local boards or grants-in-aid. Both Snow and East pointed out that they did everything possible to encourage village officers to facilitate untouchable education, but further investigation in Satara and Ahmednagar showed the widespread nature of caste Hindu opposition to missionary schools. Both the Collector of Ahmednagar, G. Waddington, and Collector of Satara, G.F.M. Grant, confirmed that while open opposition by village officers was uncommon, the widespread hindrance by village officers to mission schools like the American Marathi Mission, and to Mahar attendance, was notoriously diffuse.⁸² This view seemed to be further substantiated by the activities of the caste Hindu villagers of Ranjangao after the American Marathi Mission was reopened on 10 February 1887, its grant-in-aid renewed, and the *patel*, Bapu Bin Babaji, dismissed on 31 August 1887. Between 1887 and 1889, the dispute in Ranjangao over the American Marathi Mission School degenerated into open acts of arbitrary violence instigated by the dismissed *patel* against the Mahar families who continued to send their boys to the mission school. Rev. R. Winsor petitioned the government on 26 and 28 August 1889 with urgent requests for the government to intervene to prevent further injury to Mahar families and destruction of their property by caste Hindu villagers, and the Assistant Collector, Cappell, was despatched to quell the violence.⁸³ By the late 1880s and early 1890s a disregard for caste in missionary schools like those in Ranjangao and Manmad was clearly becoming a cause of considerable concern among caste Hindu villagers, particularly because of the untouchable economic mobility which it was facilitating within

rural Hindu society. Nonetheless, while missionary education and strategic support was clearly a factor in the growing protests of the untouchable Hindus and Christian converts in the 1880s and 1890s, the agency behind the protests arose principally, as in Ranjangao, from untouchable Hindus and Christian converts themselves.

III

In the early 1890s the case of the Dapoli municipal primary school in Ratnagiri district revealed that persistent untouchable protest, even with limited Christian missionary support, could challenge the government's ambivalent attitudes on untouchable education in government schools. On 1 July 1892, a group of retired Mahar and Chambhar non-commissioned army officers in Dapoli, led by pensioner Subhedar-Major Ganganak Sanjanak, applied to Dapoli Municipality for the admission of their children to the Dapoli municipal primary school and for the education of their children along with caste Hindu students.⁸⁴ These untouchable Mahar and Chambhar officers had been compelled by the British government around 1892 to retire from the Indian Native Army in Pune where previously they and their children had received education in regimental schools. Their older children, totalling 10 (7 Chambhar and 3 Mahar children), had been admitted to the local missionary high school in Dapoli, but their younger children, totalling 14 (4 Chambhar and 10 Mahar students), were without a primary school after the closure of the local missionary primary school the previous year in 1891.⁸⁵ The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, supervised by Rev. Alfred Gadney in Dapoli, had erected a school building in Dapoli in 1879 at a cost of Rs 5000 and the building had been occupied since 1882 as a school and accommodation for orphans and Indian Christian girls.⁸⁶ By the mid-1880s the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had five schools in Dapoli, but their grants-in-aid were threatened by low attendance caused by staff illness and unspecified 'rumours' about the school.⁸⁷ By 1891 it is unclear exactly how many of these missionary schools remained open, but the untouchable primary school students who returned to Dapoli from military stations around 1892 found themselves without access to schooling.

In response to the petition from the untouchable parents, the

Dapoli municipal council claimed, on 5 August 1892, that the Mahar and Chambhar children could not be admitted to the municipal school since all the caste Hindu boys would thereby have to abandon the school for religious reasons. They agreed, however, that if the Mahar and Chambhar petitioners could collect 20 to 25 untouchable boys, a separate class with a separate teacher would be opened for them.⁸⁸ The Mahar and Chambhar officers rejected this proposal of a separate class on the grounds that it would lead to an inferior education for their children by huddling together different standards in one class, not to mention the emphasis that separate education gave to their untouchability.⁸⁹ Moreover, as there were only 14 untouchable boys, on 8 September 1892 Subhedar-Major Ganganak Sanjanak, and the Mahar and Chambhar officers, repeated their request that the untouchable boys be admitted to the existing municipal class.⁹⁰ The municipality, however, remained opposed on religious grounds and resolved that nothing further could be done to admit Mahar and Chambhar children.⁹¹ On 21 November 1892, the Mahar officers, therefore, petitioned the Assistant Collector of Ratnagiri, and when nothing was done, they petitioned the Collector of Ratnagiri, W.W. Drew, on 1 January 1893. Drew wrote to the municipality asking whether the officers' children could be located on the verandah of the school building and receive instruction there.⁹² Forced into action by the Collector, Dapoli municipality decided on 18 January 1893 that the school building was insufficient for the present number of students and that steps should be taken to increase the size of the verandah, place the untouchable boys there, and employ another teacher to instruct them.⁹³ Lack of funds, however, prevented this decision being implemented immediately. Moreover, the Mahar and Chambhar officers were asked to pay Rs 50 as their share of the price of extending the verandah.⁹⁴ The municipality then spent the next thirteen months in preparing a plan for the extension of the school verandah and in getting the approval of the municipal engineer. His approval was still pending almost two years later in November 1894.⁹⁵

When a further address to the Collector of Ratnagiri, W.W. Drew, in November 1893 brought no further action on the matter, the Mahar and Chambhar officers took up the matter with J. Nugent, Commissioner of the Southern Division, when he visited Dapoli in February 1894.⁹⁶ Nugent pointed out to the Municipal President,

Vishnu Hari Barve, that the school was supported from public funds and should therefore be open to all castes in accordance with government grant-in-aid rules. The municipality, however, again sought to avoid the issue by now deciding to crowd the untouchable students into the original unextended verandah and ordered the schoolmaster to educate them on the verandah according to their academic levels.⁹⁷ Although their children were therefore admitted to the school verandah on 19 February 1894, the Mahar and Chambhar officers and parents had good reason to be dissatisfied with this arrangement as the level of the verandah wall obstructed the students' hearing and vision of the classroom, and the verandah was open to sun and rain alike. Moreover, the untouchable boys were thereby separated from their classes and huddled together on the verandah regardless of their age and attachment. In the final analysis, this municipal compromise of 'sitting untouchable students on the school verandah' was as much a rejection of the parents' wish for the education of their children as denying them entry to the school altogether.⁹⁸

In April 1894, therefore, the group of Mahar and Chambhar army officers organized a joint meeting of the Dapoli Chambhar Mandal, and Mahar-Chambhar Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal in the Chambhar quarter of Dapoli, in order to produce concerted action for the admission of their children to the school classroom.⁹⁹ One of the most prominent among these retired Mahar and Chambhar officers was a former *havelदार* Mahar officer, Gopal Baba Valangkar. In 1888 he had been retired from the Indian army as a result of the British government's policy of removing untouchable soldiers from its ranks. He returned to Dapoli where, along with other pensioned Mahar and Chambhar officers, he established the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal in 1890.¹⁰⁰ Other leading members of the Mandal included Subhedar Mahadaji Ramachandra Palavankar (secretary), Ramji Pandu Palavankar (a *mukadam*), and Sambhu Krishnaji Devarukkar (a mill clerk).¹⁰¹ The united demand of the Dapoli Mahar and Chambhar *jatis* that their children be admitted to government school classrooms to receive their education like caste Hindu students was publicized in a letter from Valangkar to the Marathi newspaper *Din Bandhu* on 15 April 1894.

Valangkar himself was syncretic in his social and religious outlook. Influenced by the Kabir *panth*, with a knowledge of Sanskrit literature,

Maharashtrian *bhakti* Hinduism, and Protestant Christianity, he found common ground with Christian missionaries like Gadney, both in general religious attitudes to caste Hindu orthodoxy and with regard to untouchable rights to education.¹⁰² However, although missionary connections were important in supporting the educational claims of Dapoli Mahars and Chambhars, the rationale for their actions in Dapoli came from their knowledge of the views on education of the non-brahman reformist Jotirao Phule.¹⁰³ Valangkar himself was a colleague of Phule in the Satya Shodhak Samaj. He spoke along with Phule at Satya Shodhak Samaj meetings, such as that in honour of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad in 1885, and Phule and Valangkar are reputed to have tested caste Hindu convictions on untouchability by seating visitors to the Samaj in the same eating row as Valangkar.¹⁰⁴

Jotirao Phule's views on low-caste and untouchable education in western India are portrayed graphically in his short Marathi ballad 'Brahman Teachers in the Educational Department'. Phule's ballad represents with perfect exactitude the events and sentiments which were still being played out in Dapoli in the 1890s, over twenty years after it was written. The local brahmans in Phule's ballad use their social status and educational position in the village to prevent low-caste and untouchable children attending school, while convincing colonial administrators either that they are attending or that they have no wish to be educated. Phule describes the brahman teachers' methods of preventing low-caste and untouchable attendance:

If children of their own caste make mistakes,
They repeat and explain, and give punishments wisely.
If other children make mistakes, they strike them with their fists.
They twist their ears sharply, and when no one is watching,
They beat the shudra children and make them run away.¹⁰⁵

Brahman schoolmasters and school inspectors also collaborate to mislead colonial officials about low-caste and untouchable education and to maintain brahman privileged educational and administrative status:

The master tells of their [untouchable/low-caste] qualities.
He describes them angrily. He greatly exaggerates the report.
I will tell you a little of it: 'The caste of shudras have got no sense,
They have no desire for education at all.'

This is not true. The brahmans are impostors.
 They achieve their ends and promote the position of their own caste.
 No one brings them to justice.¹⁰⁶

Valangkar, in his Marathi letters to *Din Bandhu* on behalf of the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal, described the Dapoli school entry protest in 1893–4 in a similar way. He saw the opposition to untouchable school entry as a *tamasha* or street theatre by brahman actors under the guise of religious reasoning for the sake of their social dominance. Valangkar pointed out that caste Hindus expressed themselves in public to be in favour of untouchable educational development, and he claimed that publicly ‘people shout in favour of unity, but in private they spit at this unity’.¹⁰⁷ Such deception, in Valangkar’s opinion, had to be exposed by the mobilization of untouchables to petition the government for their right to enter government schools, such as in Dapoli.¹⁰⁸ The untouchable military pensioners of the Chambhar Mandal and Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal, therefore, set about putting Phule’s challenge into practice as a result of the direction provided by their own army education, Phule’s social teachings, missionary support, and a trusting belief in British policy declarations that ‘the doors of learning have been thrown wide open and anyone of any religion or jati may enter.’¹⁰⁹

The aim of the untouchable military pensioners in Dapoli in entering government schools was, however, for them only a means to the greater end of furthering untouchable social consciousness and development. In another letter to *Din Bandhu*, Valangkar encouraged Mahars and Chambhars to organize their protest activities on ‘knowledge based on reading’ and ‘bhakti devotion fixed on God’.¹¹⁰ In Valangkar’s opinion, education was an instrument with which to develop the established socio-religious questioning inherent in untouchable *bhakti* devotionism into a widening process of self-examination and awareness of exploitation within Hindu society. Brahmins had misused their monopoly of literacy and learning to misinterpret Sanskrit scriptures in their own social interests, and to ensure untouchable servitude by denying them the educational means to challenge brahmanic control.¹¹¹ The acquisition of literacy and education, therefore, would allow untouchable Mahars and Chambhars to challenge this subjection by developing the critiques

of their oppression already inherent in their own culture, thereby allowing them to generate a new social consciousness. As Valangkar explained this perspective.

From education has come the ability for people of all religions and jatis to think about their religion. The people of every jati have established mandals in their jatis and examined their customs as a result of insight gained into the obstacles which created sorrow for human kind in the old religion. By quickly abandoning these customs, these people have determined to behave according to a religion based on truth and have begun work for the regeneration of their jatis. Thus we should acquire education for people in our jatis in the backward classes who have come to such a lowly condition, and the full strength will come to us to question a religion which does not allow us any humanity and considers us lower than beasts.¹¹²

Low-caste educational improvement was, however, in Phule's and Valangkar's opinions, hindered by the colonial theory of downward filtration of education, which had helped to perpetuate a high-caste Hindu educational and administrative monopoly. Drawing on his European reading, Phule proposed: 'We have never heard of a philosophy more benevolent and more Utopian. It is proposed by men, who witness the wondrous changes brought about in the western world, purely by the agency of popular knowledge, to redress the defects of the two hundred millions of India, by giving superior education to the superior classes and to them only . . . Upon what grounds is it asserted that the best way to advance the moral and intellectual welfare of the people is to raise the standard of instruction among the higher classes? A glorious argument this for aristocracy, were it only tenable?'¹¹³ The effect of such a policy, according to Phule, educated the brahmans and higher castes to a level which gave them a virtual monopoly of state education and administrative employment.¹¹⁴ By contrast it was very difficult to find a single educated person among the Mahar, Mang and Chambhar *jatis*, whom the educational system left 'wallowing in ignorance and poverty'.¹¹⁵ Valangkar and other writers in *Din Bandhu*, likewise, stressed the wide inequalities created by government emphasis on high-caste education.¹¹⁶ Valangkar indicated that untouchable Mahars, Chambhars, and Mangs had struggled to secure even the 'scrapings' of an education, while its 'cream' had been bestowed on

the higher castes. In spite of Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858 to allocate government employment on the basis of ability and not caste or creed, even jobs suitable to these educational 'scrapings' (such as the lower jobs in the military, police, railway or postal service) were refused to untouchables. In consequence, untouchable people were forced into exploitative menial employment in villages because of their lack of education.¹¹⁷ The Educational Commissioner, W. Lee-Warner's perception of the educational struggle in Ranjangao between 1881 and 1889 as being one of securing or preventing the social consciousness and educational means to employment mobility for untouchable villagers finds strong confirmation in the untouchable perspective of activists like Valangkar. What is more, untouchables, like those in Dapoli, perceived their failure to advance both educationally and occupationally not simply as a result of caste discrimination, but also as a consequence of ambivalent government support for untouchable education.

Although the Chambhar and Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandals petitioned the government and publicized their protest in the Marathi press, orthodox caste Hindu objection on the Dapoli municipal board, was, however, so strong that the board persisted in its policy of using the verandah for the Mahar and Chambhar students in the hope that the Commissioner of the Southern Division, Nugent, would acquiesce in the matter, 'as government in the past had rarely forced such an issue to its implementation.'¹¹⁸ Their orthodox caste Hindu perspectives prohibited literacy and education to untouchables. Exegesis of the origins of Hindu social structure (like the *purusha sukta* of the *Rig Veda*) bestowed by divine decree the prerogatives of learning, literacy, and godliness on brahmans alone, who as the foremost varna were said to have sprung from the head of the *purusha sukta* or primordial man.¹¹⁹ By virtue of their literacy, the brahman *jatis* saw themselves as interpreters of the Hindu sacred texts and believed that their learning was necessary to give the texts moral and religious form in daily life and practice. Moreover, their predominance in the colonial state's educational and administrative structures was perceived as a part of this brahmanic prerogative. By contrast, the low-caste shudras and untouchables who were said to have sprung from the feet of the *purusha sukta*, were excluded from literacy, learning and godliness, and designated the degrading menial occupations of Hindu society. According to this orthodox perspective held by the President, Barve,

and the Dapoli municipality, untouchables who aspired to education were trying to step out of their prescribed occupational roles and usurp high-caste Hindu social rights in social and government institutions. The attempts of the untouchables in Dapoli to enter Dapoli primary school, the violence against an untouchable school in Ranjangao, or the secession from the missionary school in Manmad were not merely questions of a right to an education, but more fundamental manifestations of an emergent social conflict in western India over social authority with its basis in the changing occupational rights and economic mobility which education would bring.

In June 1894, Nugent finally lost patience with Barve and the Dapoli municipality, not to mention the Collector of Ratnagiri, Drew, whose ambivalence over the implementation of Mahar educational rights Nugent found negligent. He recommended to Lee-Warner, Secretary to Government, that the Dapoli primary school grant be withdrawn.¹²⁰ Barve retorted in his own defence that untouchable inclusion in the municipal school had to be acquired by degrees because of the numerical preponderance of high-caste Hindu boys and the danger of secession of all high-caste students from the school as a result of the orthodox religious scruples of their parents. He argued that, first, the students should be introduced on to the verandah, and later to the different standards, a practice which, he claimed, had previously been adopted in Rev. Gadney's missionary school in Dapoli.¹²¹ It was pointed out that elsewhere in Ratnagiri and the Konkan, as in the nearby school of Mandagad, untouchable boys were taught on the verandah. Only due to the high untouchable population were there separate schools for untouchable children at Malvan, Pen, and Panvel.¹²² Having been criticized by Nugent for negligence, the Collector of Ratnagiri, Drew, for his part supported the Dapoli Municipal President, Barve. Drew believed that Barve had effectively ignored government orders, but at the same time had done all that was politic under the circumstances. The question, he suggested, was not whether untouchable boys should enter the school, but whether the verandah was a suitable arrangement in the light of no other solution being feasible.¹²³ When Barve was finally ordered by the Director of Public Instruction, K.M. Chatfield, to accept the officers' petition and include the untouchable boys in the main classes, although separated from the other students by a few feet, the main

cause of the problem was put down to the obstruction of the caste Hindu members of the Dapoli municipality and the inaction of the Collector of Ratnagiri, Drew.

Chatfield acted more decisively in favour of untouchable student rights in Dapoli in 1894—where there was no alternative schooling available for untouchable students—than in Manmad in 1884–5 where separation of untouchable and caste Hindu students into separate schools was a viable possibility. Chatfield was, however, undoubtedly aware that Drew's acquiescence in the use of the school verandah for untouchable students was a commonplace compromise by colonial officials where implementation of untouchable educational rights was unavoidable in the 1880s and 1890s. Indeed, where untouchable students did secure any education in government and local board schools, 'sitting on the school verandah' remained the general practical 'compromise' at the local village level. Most district officers seem to have adopted this solution and Drew was not exceptional in feeling it to be a suitable arrangement given the alternative of caste Hindu boycott of most schools which admitted untouchable students into the classroom itself. The Assistant Collector of Satara district, Fawcett, wrote in 1893:

It is a matter of regret that so few boys of the lower castes attend these schools and little improvement can, I think, be hoped for until some separate accommodation is provided for them so that they may not be obliged to shiver outside in the cold and rain during the monsoon as at present . . . Until, however, each school house contains a verandah or some sort of accommodation for low castes I fear education will not spread amongst them as quickly as can be desired. Where there is plenty of room in the building, there is no difficulty, but it is obvious that there are almost insuperable difficulties in the way of a Mahar or Mang boy taking his place in a school which is so crowded that the boys sit almost touching one another.¹²⁴

Likewise, the Assistant Collector of Surat district, Weir, indicated in 1892: 'The Dhed and Bhangi and Chamar children are almost entirely neglected in the matter of education: large sums are yearly spent on providing schools and education practically for well-born classes . . . Nominally they [untouchable students] of course can attend the schools free, but if they do come to school, they are kept outside

wet or shine. They are dirty and objectionable looking and they therefore receive transitory snatches of attention from the master who is probably a brahman and who is busy with a cleaner and pleasanter set of well-born boys inside.'¹²⁵

Lee-Warner's decision in the Dapoli case challenged 'sitting untouchable students on school verandahs' as a valid interpretation in practice of ambivalent Education Commission authorisation of untouchable education. In the following years, when untouchable groups (often with missionary backing) were vocal enough to insist on their rights to enter the schoolroom, steps were subsequently taken to ensure these rights under Lee-Warner's directive. Thus, in March 1895 in Khed, Ratnagiri district, the Collector, Drew, faced an exact repetition of the Dapoli case a year earlier, but now showed considerably more circumspection for government policy. When the vernacular school in Khed received its annual inspection, it was found that the untouchable class was located on the verandah, with 7 of the 14 enrolled boys in attendance. Drew, therefore, requested Nugent to authorise the same arrangement as in Dapoli, using the classroom, but with separate seating for the untouchable students. When this policy was implemented, however, what Drew had predicted in Dapoli immediately occurred in Khed. The caste Hindu parents withdrew their children, leaving a few Mahar and Muslim students out of a school register of 180 pupils. The caste Hindu parents in Khed sent petitions to Drew requesting a return to the old system of separation on the verandah. When it proved impossible to solve the problem by recruiting enough untouchable children to form a separate untouchable class, B.R. Sahasrabuddhe, Educational Inspector, Southern Division, was left to negotiate the Dapoli compromise of untouchable students seated at a distance of a few feet in their respective classrooms.¹²⁶

Likewise, at Uran, Kolaba district, in October 1895, the school committee of the local municipality ordered that Mahar and Mang boys should be taught with other boys in the local Marathi school, but separated by a few feet.¹²⁷ In Alindra, Matar taluka, Kolaba district, on 18 September 1900, a local missionary 'forcibly thrust' 18 untouchable students into a local government school of 80 caste Hindu students. The local inhabitants led by Dabhai Nathabhai sent a series of petitions, including one to the Commissioner, Northern Division, on 23 September, and another with 49 signatories to the

Governor of Bombay on 9 December 1902. In the petition they indicated that the caste Hindu students had been forced to abandon the school because of the 18 untouchable students, and requested that the untouchable pupils be excluded and a separate school provided for them. The disingenuous reply of the Director of Public Instruction in April 1903 was that, as there were now only 18 pupils in the school, a new school was unnecessary, but if 60 caste Hindu boys returned to the school on the terms of the Dapoli compromise, the local missionaries, who had allegedly initiated the incident, might be asked to establish a separate school for the 18 untouchable students with a grant-in-aid from government.¹²⁸

It is doubtful, however, that government strategy succeeded in overcoming, to any substantial degree, untouchable segregation on verandahs or the exclusion of untouchable students. Like the *de facto* division of schools which was authorized in Manmad in 1884, in Alindra the long-term solution was to separate the untouchable students into missionary schools. Even in Dapoli, where subsequent verification of the admission of untouchable children in 1895 suggested compliance with the government ruling, it was revealed in a further petition from Ramnak Chownak, President of the Dapoli Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal in 1901, that untouchable exclusion from primary education in Dapoli had, in practice, remained unchanged.¹²⁹ In spite of Lee-Warner's attempts in the 1890s, untouchable education in Bombay Presidency between 1880 and at least 1900 was, at best, a compromise which managed untouchable education and accommodated or allowed it to be determined by the interests of the caste Hindu social order. The Bombay government did not consistently promote 'a slow but persistent attack' on the social and religious prejudices of untouchability, but, on the contrary, the general ambivalence of most colonial administrators in practice continued to allow a largely caste Hindu perception of education and social construction to dominate in late-nineteenth-century western India. The agency for the promotion of untouchable education was not by and large the British colonial administration (although there were some notable sympathizers like Lee-Warner), but the untouchable communities themselves, often with the support of missionary contacts and resources.

IV

Many accounts of educational development in late-nineteenth-century India attribute the initiative behind educational change and social transformation directly or indirectly to colonial administrative governance. Thus, Nurullah and Naik, writing at the time of Indian independence, conceptualized the colonial government (with some assistance from missionary endeavours) as the driving force behind Indian educational change and modernisation.¹³⁰ Bruce McCully, writing a few years earlier in the 1940s, sought to link this educational development to the growth of Indian nationalism in a historical trajectory which stressed colonial education of Indians in the liberal doctrines of Western thought as the motive force behind the development of the Indian nation-state.¹³¹ McCully's thematic was also developed by others. Anil Seal, in the early 1970s, stressed government education of high-caste elites in Presidency towns as a major cause of the emergence of Indian nationalism, and David Kopf, in his examination of the 'Bengal renaissance' of the early nineteenth century, envisaged British government promotion of Oriental studies as an early impetus in enabling Indians to know their own culture and recognize the potential for national development in indigenous Indian terms.¹³² In these works the emphasis falls primarily on the agency of the colonial administration as the instrument or initiator of modernization and national development through the means of its educational institutions.

In more recent years such a linkage of education and modernization under colonial rule has, however, increasingly come under criticism, first in the work of B.H. Gumperz and Ellen McDonald, and later in that of Gauri Viswanathan.¹³³ In adopting David Newsome's analysis of Victorian education to India, Gumperz and McDonald have both argued that education in India was the inculcation of a code of moral values which linked 'godliness and good learning' in a process of self-improvement and character-building as a means towards the individual's development of intellectual truth and moral perfection. This Arnoldian educational theory of the Victorian period was applied to Bombay Presidency by its Director of Education, K.M. Chatfield, between 1874 and 1897 with a singular emphasis on 'moral character-

building' of Indian elites for administrative employment, rather than (as Newsome has indicated of Victorian Britain) the development of moral character and intellect for the purposes of political leadership. McDonald points out, thereby, that the result of colonial government education was to create Western-educated elites whose perception of social development was limited to individual moral improvement, rather than to spur structural socio-political change, until at least the 1920s. Developing Gumperz's and McDonald's insights, Viswanathan has sought to question the unalloyed belief of Nurullah and Naik in the colonial 'modernizing mission' through education, and to challenge the arguments of McCully that Britain knowingly put the educational tools of the Enlightenment into the hands of its Indian subjects. Rather, she has argued that the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment acted as a 'mask of conquest' to strengthen colonial cultural hegemony in India. She sees English education, particularly English literature, as an instrument of social control aiming to fortify colonial vulnerability in a foreign context where direct inculcation of Western (Christian) values via the Bible (instead of Western moral values via more secular literature) might have led to Hindu and Muslim religious protest. English literature thus became an indirect purveyor of Christian moral principles and Western knowledge, as a means of both training the Indian mind under the control of its platonic British guardians and shaping Indian development to colonial purpose. Colonial education was intended primarily as a process of social control rather than of social liberation.

However, a fundamental difficulty with all these accounts (whether they represent colonial education as liberating or repressive) is their primary focus on the discourse of colonial policy statements (Bentinck Minute 1835, Wood Despatch 1854, and Education Commission 1882) and concomitantly their emphasis on the colonial government as either the main driving force behind modernization (as suggested by Nurullah and Naik), the enlightened but unintentional instigator of nationalism (as proposed by McCully), or conversely as the hegemonic instrument of social control (as argued by Viswanathan). In such an emphasis on the power of colonial government 'policy', there is a strong tendency to see the actualities of educational practice in the localities solely as responses to government directive, rather than as interactive determinants which substantially conditioned and even

dictated government educational policy. Moreover, such accounts largely neglect the fact that it was not just in the elite colleges close to the centre of colonial administration (which McDonald, Gumperz, and Viswanathan analyse), but also, more importantly, in villages and towns like Manmad that Indian educational development was determined. The growing number of cases of local untouchable educational protest in the early 1880s would suggest that the 1882 Education Commission's concession of low-caste education on demand within the continuing framework of a 'downward filtration' strategy of education was less a strong administrative 'policy' directive from above than the necessary recognition of a pragmatic trend that was already becoming established in the localities. In ratifying this pragmatic trend of ambivalent compromise, the Education Commission in 1882 fuelled, in turn, a further extension of ambivalent solutions (like sitting untouchable students on school verandahs) as a result of its indecisive temporising between the policy of Arnoldian educationalists (like Chatfield) largely favouring elitist 'downward educational filtration' strategies, and those (like Lee-Warner) in favour of more general extension of education for the purposes of wider participation and concomitant socio-political control. The Manmad case in the 1880s over the downward filtration of English education to untouchables clearly suggests that both the classic characterizations of a strong-handed colonial administration, which either succeeded (as Nurullah and Naik argue) in making 'a slow but persistent attack on social and religious prejudice', or conversely (as Viswanathan argues) in exercising hegemonic social control over Indian society through English education, need much qualification in the 1880s and 1890s in western India. Rather than purposive modernization or hegemonic control, there was ambivalence, indecisive practice/policy, and inconclusive debate at the heart of colonial government with regard to the implementation of low-caste education in late-nineteenth-century western India. It was this temporizing that allowed further consolidation of a conservative and high-caste Hindu-dominated educational structure for Maharashtrian society, leading to aggravated caste conflict well into the twentieth century.

Other accounts of the promotion of educational and social transformation in nineteenth-century India have emphasized the role of Christian missionary societies. It was particularly the work of

Geoffrey Oddie, Robert Frykenberg, and Duncan Forrester which revised the view of Christian missionaries in India simply as agent of imperial enterprise.¹³⁴ Oddie's early work provided a broader socio-economic narrative of missionary endeavours in which he charted the changing nature of missionary attitudes, from outright hostility to Hindu society in the early nineteenth century to a more discriminating opposition to caste as a malaise of Hindu society by the late nineteenth century. Forrester, too, examined the emergence of a 'Protestant missionary consensus' against caste by the mid-nineteenth century and the development of missionary education as the main instrument of this attack. He examined missionary activities from their early beginnings with preference for elite instruction and downward filtration of education, and charted their change to mass conversion of low-caste Hindus and untouchables in the 1860s and 1870s. Like Oddie, he located this mass conversion in the socio-economic context of weakening *jajmani* relations in a search by low-caste labourers for new patrons and occupations, and in famines like the Telugu Famine of 1877–8.¹³⁵ Mass conversion was an expression of a widening social consciousness that was stimulated by social dislocation and missionary education, and the consequent occupational change among lower castes. It manifested itself in Christian religious form because of obstacles to social mobility within the caste system, a lack of resources among lower castes to establish 'horizontal' movement for social reform, and a search for a new egalitarian social framework and identity.¹³⁶ Thereby, in changing socio-economic times, missionary educational attacks on caste not only stimulated untouchable social uplift, but also gradually gave missionaries growing influence over state educational development in colonial India. As Frykenberg has shown of Madras under Tweeddale's governorship in the 1840s, missionary institutions by the mid-nineteenth century had come to possess extensive influence on the government regarding the spread of education in lower-caste Hindu society, the widespread effects of which clearly challenged a downward filtration policy of educational development.¹³⁷

The works of Robin Jeffrey, J.W. Gladstone, Dick Kooiman, and Koji Kawashima on Travancore have sought to expand and qualify further Forrester's, Frykenberg's and Oddie's interrelation of missionary education, intellectual opposition to caste, and socio-

economic conditions for change by examining how these factors operated and changed over a substantial period in the socio-political interstice of a Hindu princely state. All these above texts reveal how missionary educational initiative in the mid-nineteenth century gave impetus to low-caste Ezhava, Pulaya, and Paraya development from inherited to achieved status, and from dependent subordination to religious reappraisal, new socio-political consciousness, and Christian conversion. Like the economic improvement of parallel communities, such as the low-caste Nadars in Tamil Nadu whom Robert Hardgraves has described as becoming medium-sized traders as a result of the opportunities opened by missionary education after 1840, the Church Missionary Society's promotion of low-caste education in Travancore gave communities such as the Ezhavas the opportunity to develop trade in coconut, palm, and toddy products in the more liberal economy after the 1860s.¹³⁸ Likewise, London Missionary Society education allowed low-caste Nadars/Shanars and untouchable Parayas to secure employment as clerks and *kanganies* (labour supervisors) in the coffee plantations of Ceylon (1830–70) and Travancore (after 1870).¹³⁹ This economic improvement, in turn, led to missionary-initiated challenges to social restrictions such as the relaxation of dress restrictions on low-caste women after the breast-cloth protests in the 1850s, the formal abolition of Pulaya and Paraya slavery (1855), the legal removal of forced labour (1860), and a legal end to distance pollution on untouchables in public buildings and on roads (1870).¹⁴⁰ In the context of this special emancipation, stimulated by missionary education and the commercializing economy of Travancore after 1860, Jeffrey has argued that 'militant missionary' educational endeavours were the direct driving force behind low-caste and untouchable improvement and an indirect impetus, thereby, for the modernization of Travancore's social and governmental structures under the guidance of the *dewan*, Madhava Rao.¹⁴¹ Gladstone also corroborates this view of the 'militant missionary'. He argues that it was the social radicalism of missionary ideals and practice which led low-caste communities to a new spiritual and temporal emancipation either in Christian terms; or alternatively in Hindu terms such as the Shri Narayana Guru movement of the Ezhavas, and the Pulaya movement of Ayyan Kali. In spite of caste factionalism by which nineteenth-century missionary churches were riven, the ideals of the

Christian gospel and their inculcation through missionary education provided spiritual renewal and material emancipation for Christian converts and low-caste Hindus.¹⁴² In sum it is argued that it was Protestant Christian missionaries, rather than government, who were the primary agents of low-caste and untouchable educational development and social change.

In more recent years there has, however, been important qualification of the alleged militancy of this missionary role. Kawashima, for example, has indicated of the missionaries in Travancore that, as the Madras government's authorities moved from a policy of a 'civilizing' and 'modernizing' mission in Travancore in the 1860s and 1870s to non-interference by the 1890s, Travancore became more socially conservative, forcing missionaries into greater co-operation and deference to state authorities in the absence of support from the colonial government in Madras. While missionary educational and medical institutions were important to the Travancore government and could not be jeopardized, Travancore state tried to limit the conversional implications of these institutions. The socio-economic effects of missionary education in betterment of low-caste and untouchable communities and the growing reality of Christian conversion among Nadars, Pulayas, and Parayas (of the threat of conversion among Ezhavas) led the Hindu Travancore government (with its roots in high-caste brahman and caste Hindu Nair land-owning interests) to initiate pressures to curb missionary educational influence in the 1880s (such as restrictions on grants-in-aid for missionary schools, state curriculum control, inspection of teachers and prohibition of religious instruction).¹⁴³ Moreover, missionaries were increasingly expected to exact obedience from and control their low-caste converts within the framework of an essentially conservative state social hierarchy.¹⁴⁴ As Kooiman also stresses, the London Missionary Society's inculcation of Christian codes of moral obedience, missionary respect for civil authorities, and the distancing of converts caused by a missionary sense of racial paternalism led both plantation owners and landlords by the 1890s to come to see missionaries as a means of social control over their Christian labourers, rather than simply as agents provocateurs.¹⁴⁵

Such suggestions that missionary militancy was more limited in practice than hitherto believed are also reflected to some degree in

western India in the 1880s in cases like that of Manmad and Ranjangao. Just as the Madras government's 'non-interference' in Travancore in the 1880s and 1890s led to increasing social conservatism and limitations on missionary activities, so the Bombay government's alleged claims of 'religious neutrality' in the 1880s in Manmad favoured conservative caste Hindu interests and created ambivalence over untouchable educational development which impacted adversely on missionary educational activities. Rev. Mainwaring and Squire held tenaciously for untouchable and Church Missionary Society educational rights in Manmad, but in practice they were ultimately driven to compromise (in ways not dissimilar to Kawashima's study of Travancore) with the force of wider societal objections to their activities, with state administrative conservatism in the form of the 'downward educational filtration theory', and even with the bitter pill of government sanction of caste Hindu conscientious objection to Christian religious tuition. Moreover, as in Kawashima's and Kooiman's descriptions of the Travancore government in the 1880s and 1890s, there was an expectation on the part of the Bombay government that the missionaries in their Presidency would ensure suitable conduct of their congregations so as not to undermine rural social and occupational structures. Rev. Winsor of the American Marathi Mission in Ranjangao was strongly reprimanded for his lack of control over his catechists and Christian converts, in spite of government recognition of the culpability of the *patel*, Bapu Bin Babaji. Missionary education was doubtlessly an element in untouchable economic change and social mobility, but it was not simply a militant emancipatory force which operated without limitations or beyond the restraints of government and Indian society more generally.

In her study of the interrelationship of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian patterns of belief in south India, Susan Bayly has sought to de-centre even further the role of (Roman Catholic) missionaries as the main agents in the development of Indian Christian identity. In particular, she gives emphasis to the manner in which Indians adapted the doctrines of Western Christianity to their own purposes, how they 'captured' the authority of missionaries to enhance indigenous forms of social and political organization, and how they created strategies of resistance by which to incorporate and dominate the impact of colonial (missionary) forms. In emphasizing this incorporation, rather than the

transcendence of colonial forms (like Christianity), Bayly argues for a syncretic process of mixing, borrowing, and overlap of religious forms which exhibited not the diffusion of egalitarian ideologies attributed to missionaries by the interpretations of Forrester, Oddie, and others, but the continuity and predominance of an evolving indigenous social order and Indian social agents, whose Christian beliefs continued to reflect perceptions of caste, rank, honours, and ceremonial status shared throughout wider south Indian society. Christian identification was therefore not a product of social egalitarianism, but an assertion of a 'Christian' caste identity as a means of pursuing indigenous conflicts over 'rank' and 'honours'. As Bayly expresses it: 'no one involved in [these] conflicts . . . had any intention of liberating himself from the supposed constraints and disabilities of the Hindu caste system. In these conflicts religious conversion was simply one more means by which a group could seek to gain new honours within an established and increasingly stratified scheme of rank and precedence.'¹⁴⁶

Although Kooiman differs in degree from Bayly in seeing the missionary role as 'limited' rather than (as Bayly) largely 'determined' by the Indian context, he too conceptualizes missionary education as a force for low-caste social change in terms of Indian forms of social mobility, rather than in terms of more radical non-indigenous agendas for structural social change. He argues that the enhanced economic benefits, which missionary education brought to some low castes like the Ezhavas, often led to attempts to Sanskritize their customs and beliefs in order to rise in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Other lower castes like Pulayas and Parayas, whose social improvement within Hinduism was impeded by higher-caste Nairs or even Ezhavas, turned, as a result of missionary education, to Christianity as an alternative means of socio-economic mobility. Missionary education thereby activated parallel processes of social development by Sanskritization and Christianization in different low-caste/untouchable communities, but both these processes led to adaptation to the customs and rituals of Great Traditions with the aim of social mobility and advancement, rather than to radical egalitarian challenges for structural social change. Likewise, Henriette Bugge has sought to elaborate the contextual determination of missionaries by rural economic structures in her study of the Protestant Danish Mission and Roman Catholic Missions Etrangères de Paris in South Arcot, Tamil Nadu, in the late

nineteenth century.¹⁴⁷ She argues that there is no clear suggestion that untouchable labourers became Christian because they wanted missionaries to emancipate them from the caste system, or that they converted from an awareness of the social justice of Western liberal ideals, or even that they were seeking greater social mobility within Christianity as compared to Hinduism. Rather, mass conversion in the late nineteenth century was encouraged by a period of economic change in patterns of rural domination enabling untouchable labourers to change old (Hindu land-owning) masters for new (Christian missionary) masters for better material treatment and benefits (such as education) which the latter might bring. Conversion was thereby more a means of establishing new economic bonds of dependency and allegiance than the egalitarian religious movements under missionary direction which Forrester, Oddie, or Jeffrey have described. Christianization might be better described as an indigenous movement, paralleling Sanskritization among low-caste groups within the Hindu caste hierarchy. Thus, it is argued that missionary activities were not only 'limited' (as Kawashima and to some extent Kooiman suggest), but (according to Bayly and Bugge) were actually 'subsumed' into and 'determined' by the indigenous ritual and social perceptions of their congregations and this wider Indian society in which they were imbricated.

It is apparent in western India (as Bayly and Bugge suggest of south India) that missionary activities were not only 'limited' by the wider society, but 'determined' to a large degree by the indigenous socio-cultural practices of the Indian groups which they sought to convert. On the one hand, certain of these syncretic Christian-Hindu groups may be described as utilizing missionary education and Christianization (in place of Sanskritization) with the aim of social mobility within the caste structure, but on the other hand there were also simultaneously other syncretic Hindu-Christian groups (like the Dapoli Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal) which sought to use missionary education and syncretize Christian missionary values with their increasingly radicalized untouchable culture in the pursuit of a more extreme ideological attack on the caste structure itself and on the untouchability that it authorized. Drawing on Christian missionary support in terms of material patronage (often given with the aim of conversion) and often with a misplaced faith in the assistance of

colonial officials, local untouchable organizations like the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal led the drive for education and school entry protest on the basis of an indigenous but radical ideology that was formed by the syncretic incorporation into untouchable *bhakti* culture of missionary socio-religious ideals and selected ideas from the low-caste Hindu radical Jotirao Phule and the Satya Shodhak Samaj.¹⁴⁸ In particular, the activities of Phule and the Satya Shodhak Samaj before 1890 helped groups like the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal to sharpen their critical understanding of what Valangkar perceived to be a socio-religious *tamasha* orchestrated by higher-caste Hindus with the aim of securing high-caste dominance over Hindu society. Likewise, in their syncretic incorporation and re-moulding of Arnoldian educational concepts within untouchable culture, education was seen as a means of further developing the introspection and self-questioning already inherent in indigenous, untouchable *bhakti* Hindu culture for the generation of a heightened self-awareness among untouchables of their exploitation in Hindu society, and for the pursuit of their opportunities for social and economic development. Education was a means, as Valangkar explained, not only to greater individual 'godliness and good learning' (as McDonald and Gumperz argue was characteristic of caste Hindu elites), but also to wider social awareness, economic improvement, and occupational mobility, all of which allowed untouchables to challenge their caste exploitation in structural terms. Bayly and Bugge, however, seem to neglect this syncretic incorporation of colonial-missionary values and practices by radicalizing untouchable cultures, and, thereby, marginalize the dynamism created in Indian society by radical untouchable ideologies for structural social transformation.

In the final analysis, it was not therefore the ambivalent educational policy of a colonial administration, or the often supportive but socially imbricated activities of Christian missionaries, but a radical indigenous ideology/practice of untouchable educational protest that provided the agency and dynamic for untouchable educational development and cultural identity re-formation in late-nineteenth-century western India. Moreover, just as socio-religious syncretism provided the dynamism of change in the less bounded socio-religious communities of pre-colonial India, so continuation of this syncretic identity under British colonialism among those perceived to be at the

social margins, like untouchables, provided a dynamic not just for socio-economic mobility within existing social structures, but also for wider social challenge to the increasingly bounded community structures of late-nineteenth-century western India. It was the practical expression of this untouchable syncretism in educational endeavour (as in untouchable religious and military protest) which provided one of the most radical impulses for social change in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century western India.¹⁴⁹ The question of 'sitting on the school verandah' was not merely one of access across educational and occupational thresholds to better social ranking, but was in many cases—like that of the Anarya Dosh Pariharak Mandal—a syncretically dynamic and ideologically, driven indigenous protest against the caste structure itself and the untouchable discrimination it perpetuated.

Notes

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 74. Lee-Warner to East, 2 July 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
 75. Remarks by Snow, 1 February 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA. Only one student was Christian.
 76. East to Winsor, 5 February 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
 77. Winsor to Reay, 20 June 1887; A. Crawford, Commissioner, Central Division, to Mackenzie, 20 August 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
 78. Winsor to Mackenzie, 9 August 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
 79. Winsor to Reay, 20 June 1887.
 80. Winsor to Mackenzie, 4 August 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
 81. Lee-Warner to East, 2 July 1887.
 82. Waddington to Mackenzie, 1 August 1887; Grant to Mackenzie, 2 August 1887, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
 83. Letters from Winsor, 26 and 28 August 1889; Letter from Crawford, 10 October 1889, Ed. Dept. 1889, vol. 11, MSA.
 84. Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA. The other pensioned officers were Subhedar Surennak

Kondenak, Subhedar Jayanak Hamak, Subhedar Sevnak Changnak, Subhedar Ramnak Deonak, Subhedar Khod Mehtar, Subhedar Ramnak Mainak (B.R. Ambedkar's father), and Jamadar Sapnak Hoknak. Petition to Nugent from Pensioned Native Officers, Dapoli, 8 February 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA. The Mahar population numbered 85,513, while Chambhars Jingars numbered 10,694 in Ratnagiri district in 1880 *Maharashtra State Gazetteers, Ratnagiri District*, Bombay, 1880, p. 129.

85. Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894.
86. Ed. Dept. 1886, vol. 40, MSA.
87. Ed. Dept. 1885, vol. 43, MSA.
88. Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894; Summary of vernacular correspondence accompanying Drew's letter, 26 April 1894; and Drew to Sahasrabuddhe, 26 April 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
89. Nugent to Lee-Warner, 30 June 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA. The 14 primary school children were divided: seven in Standard III, four in Standard II, and three in Standard I.
90. Report of Barve, 3 April 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA; Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894; Summary of the vernacular correspondence accompanying Drew's letter, 26 April 1894.
91. Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894; Nugent to Drew, 2 May 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA.
92. Pensioned Native Officers, Dapoli, to Nugent, 8 February 1894, Ed. Dept. 1895, vol. 45, MSA; *Din Bandhu*, 1 January 1893.
93. Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894; Nugent to Drew, 2 May 1894.
94. Pensioned Native Officers, Dapoli, to Nugent, 8 February 1894; Report of Barve, 3 April 1892.
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96. Pensioned Native Officers, Dapoli, to Nugent, 8 February 1894; Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894.
97. Sahasrabuddhe to Chatfield, 29 November 1894; Report of Barve, 3 April 1892.
98. Nugent to Drew, 2 May 1894.
99. *Din Bandhu*, Letter from G.B. Valangkar, 15 April 1894, p. 3.
100. Ibid., Letter from Valangkar, 20 May 1894, pp. 2-3.
101. Ibid., Letter from Valangkar, 15 April 1894, p. 3. Other members included M.R. Savatarkar, R.G. Palavankar, G.R. Boraghavakar and B. Boraghavakar, V.D. Abodkar, B.B. Gimonkar, V. Devalkar and S.N. Jalgavakar.

102. Ibid., Letter from Valangkar, 7 August 1895; G.B. Valangkar, *Vinanti Patra* (Petition Letter), Bombay, 1889.
103. C.B. Khalmode, *Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar Charitra* (Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar—A Biography), vol. II, Bombay, 1968, pp. 218–21; S. Ralkar, ed., *Amhi Pahtlele Phule* (Phule As We Saw Him), Pune, 1891, p. 37.
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Anthropological Knowledge and Statistical Frame

Caste in the Census in Colonial India*

PADMANABH SAMARENDRA

Census operations, and various ethnographic surveys of the population conducted by the colonial state in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, generated an influential corpus of knowledge about caste. In this corpus some scholars have detected, while others have denied, a process whereby caste was transformed, the complicity of the state and Western academic disciplines in bringing about this transformation, and the imposition of new ideas on the colonized. At the risk of simplification, I will divide scholarly opinions on the subject into two broad groups. Colonialism, the first set of scholars believes, was made possible as much by ‘cultural technologies of rule’ (Dirks 2002: 9; also Cohn 1996) as by political and economic domination. In the body of colonial knowledge which was configured particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century by Western academic disciplines (Dirks 2002: 43–4), the colonized were represented as being different from and inferior to

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the colonizer (Inden 1986: 402–3). These representations, which were subsequently imbibed by Indians (Metcalf 1995: 114, 233), contributed to the legitimization of colonial domination. These views are contested by scholars who argue that the colonial state was not singularly hell-bent on the question of ‘how to “know” and subjugate’ (Bayly 1995: 214) its subjects. This group says that, rather than being marginal to the process, Indians and their traditions always combined, howsoever asymmetrically, with their Western counterparts to produce colonial knowledge (Bayly 2002: 4; Irschick 1994: 4–10; Wagoner 2003: 785–6, 798–9). As co-producers, sections of the Indian population shared with the British the authority of knowledge they had engendered (Irschick 1994: 4, Peabody 2001: 841), this being also a situation that then questions the categories ‘colonized’ and ‘colonizers’ as neatly separable.

The claim about the novelty of colonial knowledge as well as its denial has arisen from the perception of colonialism as disjuncture or as continuity from the preceding phase of Indian history. Thus Dirks, who adopts the ‘discontinuity’ view, argues that colonialism in India had ‘produced new forms of society that have been taken to be traditional; caste [is] a specifically colonial form of . . . civil society’ (Dirks 2002: 60). Susan Bayly, on the other hand, believes that colonial processes did not lead to a rupture in indigenous conceptions. While her picture of Indian society is not static and she stresses that caste in contemporary India is not a continuation from ‘ancient times’ (Bayly 2002: 4, also, 3, 2, 65), she asserts that caste in its present form was ‘engendered’ in ‘the early eighteenth century’ (Bayly 2002: 4, also, 5, 25–7) and not during or because of colonial rule. Though the ‘typing of people by caste or caste-like statuses was made considerably more comprehensive’ in the late nineteenth century, none of these developments, she claims, were ‘wholly new’ (Bayly 2002: 124, also 80, 97). British rule, Bayly insists, merely ‘expanded and sharpened’, ‘further consolidated’, ‘accelerated’, and ‘fostered’ (Bayly 2002: 4, 65, 80 and 202) caste norms already in existence since the eighteenth century.

A certain onesidedness characterizing perceptions of colonialism is also reflected in analyses of colonial knowledge. In Dirks’s account, for example, despite changes in the mode of production, knowledge always appears in the service of the colonial regime. He refers, correctly, to the shift that occurred over the second half of the

nineteenth century in the process of knowledge formation: the census commenced as an 'empirical project' (Dirks 2002: 202), surveys began to replace Sanskrit texts as the source of information about people, and, metaphorically speaking, 'anthropology supplanted history as the principal colonial modality of knowledge' (Dirks 2002: 43). How did this empirical shift relate to the text-based knowledge on caste produced by Indologists since the late eighteenth century? Instead of exploring the vast areas of conflict that emerged between different traditions of knowledge on questions regarding the real structure of caste and the sources of authentic information on the subject, Dirks insists on showing the continuity of Indological interpretation and its seamless blending with census surveys and anthropological research. Thus, he claims that the 'empirical project of the census was wedded to the . . . Orientalist categories' (Dirks 2002: 202), refers to the continuing colonial 'reliance on Brahmanic and textual authority' (Dirks 2002: 210), and writes of the 'prominence of Indologists and Indology in anthropological discourses on India' (Dirks 2002: 59). I question these suppositions below. However, let us first understand why the continuity of Indological interpretation into the later phase is so crucial for Dirks's hypothesis. Colonialism, Dirks believes, brought disruptions within indigenous society; with caste this happened when caste was 'refigured as a distinctly religious system' (Dirks 2002: 12). The religious form of caste was encapsulated in the 'dharmic idea of *varna*' (Dirks 2002: 60) which the Indologists culled from Sanskrit texts. Why must Dirks see the transformation of caste in religious terms? The influence upon him of Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism' is apparent. The representation of caste as the religious 'other', he believes, allowed the colonial regime to proclaim its modernist self and deny Indians all political will and agency. This explains the persistence of the Indological thesis in Dirks's explanation, even as it leads him to make some rather incompatible claims: thus, in the late nineteenth century, he seems to argue, colonial knowledge of caste was both brahmanical and anthropological; similarly, Indians under the spell of colonial knowledge were supposedly imbibing a religious notion of caste precisely when caste movements in various parts of the country were making political demands.

Susan Bayly, on the other hand, does not pay sufficient attention to the processes of knowledge production because she assumes

colonialism brought about no fundamental change in the notion of caste. She fails to find any connection on the one hand between various theories of caste—materialistic and racial—propounded in the late nineteenth century, and on the other colonial governance. Instead, she says these theorizations were the consequence of personal initiatives by ‘scholar-officials’ who strove to ‘make their mark in a wider learned world which had come to be dominated by ethnological debate’ (Bayly 1995: 167, also 214; Bayly 2002: 119). Understandably, when examining the notion of caste in the late colonial phase, Bayly does not probe the role of census operations in shaping this notion, or inspiring ethnographic surveys and various theorizations of caste.

In my investigation here of caste in the colonial census, I try to go beyond the binary of ‘discontinuity’ and ‘continuity’. I underline the presence of multiple spheres of knowledge production within the project of enumeration. The state did not necessarily have an unequivocal or decisive say in all these spheres. Implicit in my approach is a questioning of the cognition of the colonial regime as a singular structure. The census began with a conflict between the administrative and statistical perspectives on caste; in the latter phase, the state and the Western academy approached the subject with their respective agendas. The representation of caste in the census reports was thus far from uniform; at the same time, in the very process of enumeration the concept underwent a fundamental change. My main points are: I believe that caste, as conceived in contemporary academic writings and applied while framing the policies of the colonial and postcolonial state, is a new *idea*. It emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century in the course of, and because of, census operations. By implication, then, I suggest that the social form imagined by the term ‘caste’ had never previously existed in Indian society.

I should clarify here that when I claim that caste is a new idea, I am not reiterating the view often credited to Nicholas Dirks. A careful reading of his *Castes of Mind*, in fact, reveals Dirks’s acute discomfort on the question of the ‘invention’ of caste: ‘I hope to weave an argument far more complicated than that the British invented caste, though in one sense this is precisely what happened’ (Dirks 2002: 9). Again, ‘I will argue that caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon . . . By this I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British . . . [Nevertheless] colonialism

made caste what it is today' (Dirks 2002: 5). The cumulative weight of Dirks's arguments moves in favour of suggesting that under colonialism caste was transformed (and not invented) as 'a fundamentally religious social order' and was made 'far more pervasive' (Dirks 2002: 13). Why does Dirks find it so difficult to sustain the argument that caste is a new concept? First, because he does not, as explained above, fully recognize the novelty of the census which, with inputs from anthropology, had the potential of producing new social forms. Second, and more important, like his adversaries from the 'continuity' camp, Dirks believes that caste did exist in precolonial times and, whatever its existing connotations, it was not a figment of the British imagination. This premise is not only inadequate, it is also misleading.

Caste is a foreign word which modern scholars have assumed to be an equivalent of *varna* or/and *jati* (Samarendra 2011: 51–2), entities that represent different, though not always unconnected, indigenous traditions. This assumption is questionable. In order to illustrate the non-equivalence of caste with *varna* and *jati*, I look briefly at their meanings. Caste has been variously defined as an endogamous, ethnic, occupational, ritualistic, or racial division. Underlying all these definitions are present the following two suppositions: that caste actually exists and can be observed in society, and that it has a fixed and uniform boundary, implying that communities across India called castes have something in common. The *varna* classification of society, when compared, seems to share the definitiveness of caste: as mentioned in the Sanskrit texts, there are four groups within this schema, the attributes of which are more or less consistent. Yet, unlike caste, the *varna* system, scholars have pointed out, is text-based and does not exist on the social plane in the same form. No society across the Indian subcontinent is actually divided into merely four groups of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra—often equated with priests, warriors, commoners, and the class of servants, respectively (Smith 1994: 3). The presence of *jatis*, on the other hand, can be observed in society. The similarity with caste, however, ends there. The connotation of *jati*, in contrast with caste, is far from uniform. For example, in vernacular literature we come across expressions such as the Lohar and the Sonar *jati* (professional communities), the Maratha and the Bangla *jati* (linguistic communities), the Hindu and the Mussalman *jati* (putatively, religious communities), the Munda and the Oraon

jati (communities presently registered in government documents as tribes), the Vaidya and the Bhumihaar *jati* (communities which are endogamous), *mardon ki jat* and *aurat jat* (community of men and community of women), etc. Evidently dissimilar, these communities are not necessarily endogamous either. If *jati* is to be equated with caste, as many contemporary scholars believe, we might ask which of the above-mentioned *jatis* could be treated as castes. And what might be the criteria of selection? So, what is caste—*varna* or *jati*? And when scholars speak of a pan-Indian caste system, what are they referring to—a system of *varna* or of *jatis*? I argue that caste is neither *varna* nor *jati*, though it masquerades as one or the other or both at the same time. And since caste is not the same as the other two, it must be a new category deployed for imagining Indian society. I continue using the word ‘caste’ despite the aforesaid objection because the colonial documents that I refer to employ the word. However, as I progress, I will regularly clarify the connotations of caste *vis-à-vis* its presumed indigenous equivalents.

The birth of caste was directly connected with the start of census operations in India from around the middle of the nineteenth century. The census dealt with population numbers. In Europe, statistics had emerged in the nineteenth century as a ‘part of the technology of power in a modern state’ (Hacking 1991: 181). Its introduction by the state in colonial India did not follow exactly the same pattern (Appadurai 1994: 315, Smith 1985: 173). Yet, it is widely argued that quantification rendered the colonized ‘societies . . . knowable, and knowable in a so-called objective form’ (Smith 1985: 173). Numbers relating to people and resources became a part ‘of the illusion of bureaucratic control and a key to a colonial *imaginaire*’ (Appadurai 1994: 317). If number was the key to knowledge, what were the preconditions to be fulfilled to first articulate the socially shaped diverse caste identities in the objectified language of numerals? To analyse the implications of the census operations for caste, we must look at the procedures followed within the project.

The census was, first, the direct survey of a population; instead of surmising or referring to texts, enumerators went to people with a questionnaire, noting their number and attributes. The purpose was not merely to count but also to classify the population under different heads—age, sex, religion, caste, occupation, etc. The conduct of

these two interrelated processes depended on several conditions. First, the entity to be counted had to be homogenous and discrete, with no overlapping boundaries. For example, people to be enumerated as Hindus had uniformly to be defined as such and separated, say, from Sikhs, Buddhists, and animists. Classification, on the other hand, referred to the practice of sorting, arranging, and aggregating the data in different columns and rows within a tabular format. The first step was thus to formulate the classificatory principles. The principles would be derived from the defining attributes of the entity to be classified. The census was a serialized pan-India project. The data that was collected was put to comparison across the provinces, as well as over the various editions of the census operations. The fulfilment of this very basic exercise hinged on consistency in the use of classificatory models. Uniformity in the criteria of identification and classification of communities was thus essential for a proper conduct of enumeration. And, once again, keeping in view the empirical nature of the project, these criteria had to be drawn not from texts but from lived social experience.

The given features of the census turned it into a unique exercise, different from all other projects—pre-colonial and colonial—of population assessment. While communities were enumerated by political regimes even in medieval times (Peabody 2001, Guha 2003), the unit of enumeration was the household rather than the individual. Hence the difference in the indigenous terms: *khana-sumari* in medieval India referred to the preparation of household lists, while the census in colonial times was often called *mardum-sumari*, literally, the counting of men. Apart from not being direct surveys of population, pre-colonial enumerations did not follow a uniform scheme to classify people. Caste-sensitive household lists prepared by an officer of Marwar, Rajasthan, in the seventeenth century (cited in Peabody 2001: 824–9) clearly reveal these characteristics of medieval enumeration schedules, even if Peabody contends that they exhibit a similarity with the colonial census. Since the unit counted was the household, such lists neither present any aggregate figure of population nor always include communities which could be recognized as castes (see the tables cited in Peabody 2001: 827–8). Moreover, the classificatory schema differed from area to area. Though not unaware of these peculiarities, Peabody prefers to claim continuity and not the

reverse between medieval household schedules and the colonial census (Peabody 2001: 819, 822–3). I believe the census was different even from the ethnographic surveys of the late nineteenth century; the latter, though drawing upon fieldwork, merely prepared an inventory of castes and their characteristics; there was no compulsion here to compare and classify the entries.

The novel features of the colonial census fundamentally affected the concept of caste. Direct enumeration meant that people were approached in person by enumerators. The responses of people to the query about their caste, in line with the varied nature of *jati*, showed great divergence, prompting questions about whether what was being counted related at all to a single entity. Simultaneously, the empirical gaze of the census raised doubts about the relevance of the *varna* model found in Sanskrit texts that had been accepted as authentic in colonial writings since the late eighteenth century, thus creating uncertainties about the categories available for classifying castes. Referring to the complexities associated with the process of enumeration, Hacking writes that the 'printing of numbers was a surface effect. Behind it lay new technologies for classifying and enumerating . . . Categories had to be invented into which people could conveniently fall in order to be counted' (Hacking 2004: 2–3). The project of the census had generated the burden of identifying and classifying castes without possessing the intellectual tools required to accomplish the task. Compelled by circumstances, the colonial state took recourse to anthropology to define and discipline caste. But the agenda of the state and the discipline of anthropology were far from coterminous. This notwithstanding, anthropological concepts, operating alongside a statistical frame, profoundly shaped the idea of caste in the course of the first five decades of the census operations.

I. Beginnings of the Census

Assessments of the population in colonial India had started from the early years of the nineteenth century (Cohn 1990: 233–6). These, however, were indirect appraisals, there being little uniformity in the methods followed. One of the earliest proposals in favour of a census appeared in the *Memoir on the Statistics of the North Western Provinces of the Bengal Presidency*, where it was recommended that the population

returns be 'compiled not from averages of the number of persons to a house, but from actual enumeration of the people' (Shakespear 1848: 173). Accordingly, the first census based on a direct survey of the population took place on 1 January 1853, in the North Western Provinces (hereafter NWP).

Even before the census began, the revenue department had been generating population data which appeared as adjuncts amidst other agrarian details: in the *Memoir*, for example, these occupied a few of the columns in the tables entitled 'Statistical Return of Land and Population' (Shakespear 1848: 12, 18, 169). The NWP census of 1853—an independent and separate project of enumeration—signalled the gradual release of population data from the control of the revenue establishment. The direction of change was reflected in the addition of new columns during subsequent censuses giving information about various aspects of people's lives. The enumeration of caste started from the second census of the NWP in 1865 and continued to be a prominent part of the colonial census till 1931. There was no grand design of knowing and controlling the population—as generally attributed to the colonial state—inspiring the inclusion of caste in the census of the NWP. The objectives were rather limited: caste identity was expected to 'facilitate classification [of the population] into "agricultural" and "non-agricultural"' (Plowden 1867: 1). In addition, information on castes was supposed to help check customs such as 'infanticide' prevailing amongst some of them (Plowden 1867: 30, 48).

Caste, though included in the census, proved difficult to tackle. The enumerators discovered during the surveys that society was not patterned according to the fourfold *varna* division comprising Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Instead, in the localities they encountered *jatis*—communities with unfamiliar names, uneven status, and dissimilar characteristics. For example, the report on the census of the NWP in 1865 showed Sikh, Jain, Goshain, Jogee, Sunni, etc., to be a part of the same caste table that included the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra (Plowden 1867: 80–1). The caste table in the report on the census of Oudh in 1869 presented a similar picture. Apart from Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya, the group called 'higher caste of Hindu' included Bengali and Punjabi (linguistic groups), Sikh and Jain (religious sects), Kayasth (scribal community), Marwari and

Kashmiri (regional groups), and Jats—the local agricultural community (William 1869: 86). Colonial scholars, I should clarify, were not unaware of the existence of *jatis*. However, in the earlier decades these were co-opted within the *varna* framework: their existence was not interpreted to deny the validity of *varna*. By contrast the empiricist view, Inden writes, was not concerned with ‘the bookish *varnas*’ but the *jatis* or ‘the real, empirical . . . localized, hereditary, endogamous (in-marrying) groups’ (Inden 1990: 59).

From the very early rounds, census officials were faced with a serious challenge: which of those diverse *jatis* enlisted in the census schedules were castes, and how were they to be classified in view of the fact that the *varna* framework was not considered relevant any more? The diverse identity of the *jatis* precluded the possibility of cataloguing these according to any uniform classificatory principle. The caste table in the report on the census of the NWP in 1865 had several columns within which all the *jatis* were placed: first there were four columns headed by Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra; then came five columns named after Sikhs and four sections of the Jains; following which came fourteen columns of ‘religious sects’, three columns of ‘travellers’, and finally one of those ‘Hindoos whose caste is not known’ (Plowden 1867: 81). On the other hand, the census of Oudh in 1869 employed the following nine columns for the purpose of classification: ‘Europeans, Eurasians and Native Christians, Higher castes of Muhammadans, Muhammadans converts from the higher castes of Hindus, Lower castes of Muhammadan, Higher castes of Hindu, Lower castes of Hindu, Aboriginal castes, Religious mendicants and Miscellaneous’ (William 1869: 72).

The enumeration of castes during the early census operations had thus generated conflicting trends. Census reports from the initial decades show that the caste list of every province differed from that of every other because of the presence of heterogeneous *jatis* in the country’s diverse areas. Further, every province seemed to have adopted a distinct classificatory table keeping in mind the nature of the local *jatis*. However, the operation of the census depended on the ability to compare data. Only by comparing and aggregating caste data from the various provinces could one know the number of people within a specific caste in any province, or the country as a whole, over different periods of time. But the dissimilarity in the caste lists as well as

in the classificatory tables that arrived from the first decade of caste enumerations seemed to deny any possibility of data comparison. The census faced an unresolved contradiction: its schedules attested to the heterogeneity of *jatis* whereas its processes demanded homogeneity of the communities to be counted. This problem was to assume acute proportions with the inauguration of the pan-Indian decennial census series and large increases in the collection of data.

II. Caste and Statistical Disorder

The pan-Indian decennial census series commencing 1871–2 suffered from several defects. It did not cover all the regions of British India, nor was it conducted on the same day. However, its most glaring failure related to the classification of castes.¹ ‘Great pains have been taken’, it was admitted in a memorandum presented before the British parliament, to arrange castes of different provinces in a definite order; the outcome, however, was ‘not satisfactory, owing partly to the intrinsic difficulties of the subject, and partly to the absence of a uniform plan of classification’ (Waterfield 1875: 20).

In order to avoid the shortcomings of the preceding census, in 1877 the Secretary of State dispatched a set of measures for consideration to the Government of India. The Government of India constituted a three-member Census Committee comprising W.C. Plowden, H. Beverley, and W.R. Cornish, all experienced in conducting census operations, to comment on the draft. Subsequently the draft, along with the opinion of the committee, was circulated among provincial administrators for their response. The transaction between the Secretary of State, the committee, and the provincial officials on the question of caste enumeration reveals that the census was being riven apart by two conflicting concerns: the statistical commitment to arrange data, and the administrative desire to seek information about the subject population. I elaborate below the respective approaches in order to avoid a monolithic representation of the colonial state, and to historicize the circumstances that led the state to directly seek ethnographic knowledge in order to map caste groups.

For the Secretary of State, who had little direct role in the administration of India, the census was a statistical project in which caste did not merit a place. The communities enlisted as castes varied,

lacking any fixed and uniform boundary. He observed that often a man would state that he was 'by "caste" a "marhatta" when he is a Kunbi of the Marhatta nation; that he is by "occupation" a carpenter when he is a cultivator of the carpenter caste; that he is by "religion" a Brahmin, when he is a Brahmin by caste.'² In addition to such uncertainties surrounding the identification of castes, there was the problem of inconsistency in classification. Referring to the preceding census, the Secretary of State said: 'In some of the provinces the Hindoo population was classified according to . . . four main divisions, but in others they were shown . . . with no distinct order, or were arranged according to the general occupation of caste.'³ He was convinced that 'unless some better arrangements are made, it would probably be advisable to omit the column [of caste] altogether.'⁴ If it was still 'considered desirable to retain the column', he emphasized, 'each provincial compiler should be instructed how to summarise the figures, so as to admit of their being brought into one statement for the whole of India.'⁵

The stance of the Census Committee was shaped by conflicting pulls. Being erstwhile administrators, its members believed that 'enquiry in connection with caste . . . might add much interesting information to our knowledge of native life.'⁶ Their immediate concern, however, was the statistical arrangement of caste data. Recounting the experience of the earlier censuses, the committee wrote that there was 'no part of the work of compilation which presents so many difficulties, involves so much labour, and at the same time is so unsatisfactory when completed, as the working up of the caste tables.'⁷ Conflicting pulls led to contradictory recommendations. Caste, the committee proposed, would feature in the enumerator's schedule: 'Following the precedent of the later enumerations [NWP census 1865 onwards] we have provided in the schedule the means of collecting information in regard to the castes and sects.'⁸ However, this information was not to be compiled or presented in 'any specific table for the distribution of the people by castes.' In fact, the committee declared, 'We do not . . . recommend—indeed we are completely opposed to—any classification by caste of the Hindu population.'⁹ The proposal to collect and yet not collate caste data was justified on the ground that these formed the subject of 'special enquiry, and can be . . . undertaken by an antiquarian rather than a statistical authority.'¹⁰

Neither viewing the census as a statistical exercise, nor carrying the burden of processing data, a large number of provincial officials, convinced of the administrative relevance of caste, favoured its inclusion in the project. 'The object of the census is manifold; it is not merely . . . fiscal', contended the Government of Madras. Information about caste, it asserted, was 'absolutely required for public purposes . . . all castes should be enumerated. The registry of all is most essential.'¹¹ Similarly, the Deputy Inspector General of Police, NWP, urged 'a complete sub-divisional caste statement . . . of Rajputs or Thakurs, Jats and Ahirs'. The information, he argued, 'will be [of] untold value in all enquiries connected with infanticide, and will be perhaps of considerable political utility.'¹² Not every provincial government supported the enumeration of castes in the census. Nevertheless, whether opposing or endorsing the measure, they were guided by local administrative considerations and not the statistical viability of the exercise.

The discrepancy between statistical commitment and administrative concerns was also reflected in the categories proposed to classify castes. The Secretary of State's primary objective was to ensure a uniform tabulation of castes should the subject be retained in the census. He therefore recommended that it might be 'better to . . . arrange the Hindoos generally under . . . Brahmins . . . Kshatriyas . . . Vaisyas . . . and Sudras.'¹³ He also ruled out any attempt to identify castes among Muslims in the census; he would not have, he stated, any 'subdivision of Islam' along caste lines.¹⁴

The Census Committee however found the text-based schema proposed by the Secretary of State for classification unrealistic. 'We do not consider . . . [the] suggestion to recognize only the four main divisions of Manu', the committee argued, 'satisfactory . . . whether this fourfold division ever really existed [or not] in practice . . . nearly all trace of it has disappeared in the present day.'¹⁵ Obligated to ensure statistical uniformity yet not oblivious of the observed social realities, the committee concluded that classification, if 'considered . . . necessary', could be 'effected in a far simpler manner' by placing castes 'under . . . a. Brahmins b. Kshatriyas c. Other Hindus, including Sikhs.'¹⁶

Provincial administrators opposed both the text-based and the pan-Indian classifications on the grounds that these disregarded the local

situation. The Government of Bombay, for example, contended that the fourfold 'division of castes' was 'not . . . workable' in the province as it would 'class . . . among the Sudras, the Bania, the Maratha, and the Dher—three classes which are completely distinct from each other.'¹⁷ The Lieutenant Governor of Punjab was more categorical in demanding that the 'enumerator's form should . . . have direct reference to the leading facts in the native society.'¹⁸

I will digress here to underline the role of the empirical method used during the census surveys in the constitution of a new idea of caste. The understanding of caste in colonial writings in the late-eighteenth and the early-nineteenth century was shaped by Sanskrit texts. William Jones and Henry Colebrook, despite being aware of *jatis*, treated the text-derived *varna* order as representing the original and authentic caste system. The census brought a fundamental change to this perspective. Rather than continuing with the *varna* model, as Dirks suggests, census officials repeatedly rejected it as unreal. The changed circumstances were reflected in their critique of the deemed propagator of the model: Manu. Thus Cornish, when compiling the report on the census of Madras in 1871, wrote: 'in a critical inquiry regarding the origin of caste we can place no reliance upon the statements made in the Hindu sacred writings. Whether there was ever a period in which the Hindus were composed of four classes is exceedingly doubtful' (Cornish 1874: 122). Similarly C.F. Magrath, the officer compiling the list of castes from Bihar, stated that 'it was necessary, if the classification was to be of any use, that the now meaningless division into the four castes alleged to have been made by Manu should be put aside' (cited in Beverley 1872: 155). In 1877 the Census Committee wondered whether the *varna* model 'ever really existed in practice', and in a report on the census of Punjab in 1881 Ibbetson pronounced this schema as 'artificial' (Ibbetson 1883: 174).

The critique of Manu was addressed in a broader sense to the text-based expositions of Indian society. Yet, as Trautmann points out, the textual categories, though disputed, could not be discarded during the empirical shift (Trautmann 1997: 26, 191-206). Thus, while the *varna* model was rejected by the enumerators, some of its components still found a place in the census reports when these passed the test of physical verification. Recognized as 'still a living entity', Brahmans were included in the classificatory table of the report on the census of

NWP in 1872 (Plowden 1873: lxxix); for the same reason the Census Committee recommended the inclusion of 'Brahmans and Rajputs' in the tables for the proposed census of India in 1881 (for further details, see Samarendra 2011: 54). The integrity of the *varna* order was, in the process, broken; hollowed out of earlier connotations, the constituting groups when individually appropriated were suffused with new meanings. The census, I believe, was accompanied with a process of what might be termed the empiricalization of textual traditions. In the course of enumeration, the components of the *varna* order, i.e., Brahman, Kshatriya, etc., were empiricalized: i.e. attributed a visible and verifiable body. Caste, henceforth, was recognized necessarily as an empirical category. It is in the context of empirical inquiry, I should add, that the academic tradition of counterposing *varna* and *jati* in terms of textual *vs* real (or ideal *vs* actual, original *vs* contemporary) started. This tradition continues in the writings on caste even today.

Despite all efforts, discrepancies persisted in the census. For instance, in the enumerator's schedule, the class of 'Hindu' had been subdivided into castes, but the total number of Hindus, in 1881, did not match the sum total of caste persons—the numbers being, respectively, 187,937,450 and 188,121,772 (see Plowden 1883: 277). This mismatch occurred because certain communities, though classified as castes, had not been counted as Hindus. The conflicting numbers cast doubts on the authenticity of the census project. It was increasingly being acknowledged that to count caste it was first necessary to know what caste was. In 1882 W.C. Plowden, the outgoing Census Commissioner, recommended that in every province 'some officer who has a taste for, and a knowledge of, archaeological research' should be deputed to compile information about caste. The 'advantage of having such information at hand at the next census', he concluded, needed 'no comment'.¹⁹ Responding to the recommendation, the Government of Bengal appointed H.H. Risley, in 1885, to conduct a survey of castes and occupations of the people of the province.²⁰

This ethnographic move was forced on the state because of the conjunction of two developments—the empirical mode of enquiry and the beginning of all-India census operations. Empirical investigations, not absent in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century (Pels 1999), had cast doubt on the existence of *varna*. Nevertheless, the belief of colonial officials in the existence of a pan-Indian caste

structure was unchanged. Several factors sustained this belief. The first related to the burden of history. In the body of knowledge about Indian society that census officials inherited from the Sanskritists, the existence of caste had been already registered. Further, the Sanskritists had addressed both *varna* and *jati* as caste. So, even when the *varna* order seemed in doubt, *jatis* continued to be counted as castes. The second factor was linked to the project of the state. The census operations produced a social map of India. At the very moment when *varna* and other text-based concepts were being questioned, the census was reconstituting pan-Indian identities—caste, Hindu, etc.—within and through its statistical format. The census operations followed the patterns of administrative division: district census reports were compiled to produce a provincial report; provincial reports together, in turn, generated the general report on the census of India. Implicit in this format was the assumption of the universality of caste, so that castes from the different parts of the country could be added up and presented in a master table of castes. Therefore the imperative thrust upon census officials was to uncover the essence of caste, to abstract certain defining features on the basis of which castes could be sifted and identified from amidst the multifarious *jatis* and then placed within a new pan-Indian classificatory grid. As Cohn notes, most of 'the basic treatises on the . . . caste system written during the period 1880 to 1950 were . . . by men who had important positions either as census commissioners for all of India or for a province' (Cohn 1990: 241–2).

III. Anthropology and the Colonial State

The completion of the census of 1881 marked a watershed in the history of the project in India. Persistent problems in statistical computations had rendered untenable a continuation of the census as a project concerned merely with the collection and compilation of data. From the concluding decades of the nineteenth century, the colonial state came into closer contact with anthropology in order to comprehend caste. The results of the survey of Bengal that Risley had undertaken were published in 1891 in four volumes entitled *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*; subsequently, under the generic title of *Tribes and Castes*, glossaries of communities were compiled for

the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (1896), Southern India (1909), Punjab and North-Western Provinces (1911), and the Central Provinces (1916). The census of 1901 went on to witness the most extensive use of anthropological concepts to elucidate caste. Prior to the ethnographic surveys sponsored by the provincial governments, certain census officials such as James Bourdillon and Denzil Ibbetson had tried to analyse caste. These attempts were a consequence of personal curiosity and not part of state initiative. The development in the post-1881 phase has been interpreted by scholars in favour of the argument that, in late-nineteenth-century India, the state had become 'ethnographic' and knowledge anthropological; that the state actively collaborated with European academic institutions to produce this knowledge in order to 'understand and control its subjects' (Dirks 2002: 43–4; also Metcalf 1995; Inden 1990). The situation was far more complicated.

The agenda of British institutions engaged in anthropological research in the late nineteenth century was very different from that of the state in India. Anthropology was focused on the societies of Africa and Asia, which were designated 'primitive'. Placed on the other end of a linear scale, these societies supposedly portrayed the prehistory of mankind, from which was traced a universal trajectory of progress reaching its pinnacle in contemporary Europe. Academic associations, Stocking clarifies, were 'little concerned with the application of anthropology to colonial problems' (Stocking 1987: 272); it was the objective of illustrating and elucidating primitive social forms that enthused those advocating the study of tribes and castes. These institutions used the occasion of every impending survey of the population in India to impress upon the local government the necessity of conducting enquiries in the service of science. Thus, William Flower, President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (hereafter BAAS), suggested that the census of 1891 offered 'an admirable opportunity to collect lists' of exogamous and endogamous subdivisions of tribes and castes. 'The information obtained', he continued, 'would have great scientific value.'²¹ Again, before the census of 1901 the BAAS sent a set of requests, including one to 'obtain . . . a series of photographs of typical individuals of the various races, and . . . of archaic industries.'²²

The objective of the colonial state was by contrast rather limited.

By agreeing to seek ethnographic knowledge, even though for the limited purpose of preparing a list of castes and tribes, the state had exposed itself to influence from the Western academy, even as its initial and primary concern remained the classification of castes. Hence it was keen to limit the investment, both material and academic, in anthropological research and keep it germane to the specific problem. What followed then was a continuous process of conflict and negotiation between the state and the academy over the size and direction of ethnographic surveys. Rejecting the suggestion of the BAAS to collect data about endogamous and exogamous practices, the Government of India declared that it would be 'quite impracticable for the enumerators . . . to undertake the task [and] would greatly increase the risk of inaccuracy in the statistics generally.'²³ By the time of the next round of the census, the involvement of the government in ethnographic exercises had indeed increased. Nevertheless, this did not prevent it from setting forth 'conditions' for receiving the state's 'assistance' in scientific ventures. Reacting to the proposal submitted by the BAAS, in 1901, the government wrote: 'assistance . . . can only be given under certain conditions . . . The scheme must not cost much . . . must produce definite results . . . and . . . must not impose much extra work on the district officers.'²⁴

The Western knowledge complex and the colonial state came together but with differing objectives that found expression in the dilemma noticeable in the writings of Risley. During the survey of Bengal, Risley had played a leading role in applying anthropological concepts to the study of caste; as the Census Commissioner in 1901, he had also introduced the most far-reaching measures for what subsequently turned out to be the final attempt in the census to implement the state's programme of classifying castes. The presence in his ethnographic inquiries of the two contexts, academic and administrative, was indicated by the way the author of *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* was introduced on the book's title page. Next to the author's name it said 'Indian Civil Service'. But what separated him from predecessors associated with population surveys was an additional designation—'Officer of the French Academy' (Officer, D'Academie Francaise). Risley himself had no doubts that his enquiries carried a larger scientific agenda. 'It was understood . . . from the first', he wrote, 'that the objects to be aimed at . . . were partly scientific and

partly administrative.' 'From the standpoint of . . . anthropology', he continued, 'it was hoped that it might be possible . . . to arrive at fresh data throwing light on the ethnological problems . . . discussed in Europe.' 'The principal points', he added, were 'the early history of marriage, the development of the family, modes of relationship, the early history of inheritance . . . and . . . something may be done to render available, for the use of scientific men in Europe, the large body of barbarous or semi-barbarous custom, both Aryan and non-Aryan, which still survives in India' (Risley 1891: vi).

Risley acted under certain constraints: funds for the surveys came from the state, and the researchers, including Risley himself, happened to be its officers. This created an obligation to justify the demand for detailed anthropological research *vis-à-vis* the specific requirements of the state. Risley admitted that his enquiries might seem 'to cover a far wider range than . . . contemplated by the Census Commissioner [W.C. Plowden, 1881] and the Government of India' (Risley 1891: v). Further, 'many persons will set down the enquiry as practically useless' or as 'luxuries' that would have 'no direct bearing upon the actual work of administration' (Risley 1891: vii). Several moves were forced under the circumstances. The 'native society [was] governed by rules', Risley declared, and anthropology could lay bare those rules, that 'system upon which the whole native population regulates its domestic and social relations' (Risley 1891: vii). Apart from asserting their general utility for administration, the particular efficacy of anthropological ideas in classifying caste was, naturally, proclaimed. However, often it was only by going beyond and against the premises of contemporary anthropology that this instrumentality of knowledge could be claimed. Thus Risley, in order to classify castes, referred to Brahmanical injunctions, mythical history, public opinion, etc., and accommodated these in the same report where hitherto he had discussed concepts considered scientific—racial division, totemism, anthropometrical measurements, etc.

The existence of an administrative context alongside the intellectual one in projects sponsored by the state meant that colonial knowledge could never be exclusively academic (anthropological) in nature. However, before exploring the nature of this knowledge, we should ask what enabled Risley to contend that anthropology—which operated within a universal frame and which, in general, studied 'primitive'

societies—could even address the specific classificatory questions faced by a state in a colony. Further, how could an exposition that claimed to be scientific accommodate Brahmanical injunctions and mythical histories within its explanatory sweep? The history of the discipline of anthropology might provide an explanation here.

Anthropology in Britain had emerged through a process of conflict and convergence between what were subsequently claimed to be its sub-disciplines (Stocking 1987: chapter 7). Philology, ethnography, ethnology, anthropology, etc., had existed in the mid-nineteenth century as overlapping yet separate fields of study, the inclusion of which under 'Anthropology' was sought by styling the new discipline as the science of mankind. Early in its career, anthropology could not impose on its deemed branches the disciplinary markers in terms of method or themes of investigation. Rather, as Stocking writes, it 'remained for a long time a loosely defined field embracing various forms of inquiry on more or less equal terms' (Stocking 1987: 270, also 268–9).

Risley's writings illustrate the state of the discipline. In order to understand how 'the main results of the Bengal inquiries' were organized, it was first necessary, he wrote, 'to take stock of . . . terminology' (Risley 1891: xxv), in particular, of the three key terms—ethnography, ethnology, and anthropometry—belonging to 'the circle of studies grouped together under the head of anthropology' (Risley 1891: xxvi). Let us concern ourselves, at present, with the first two. Ethnography, Risley explained, 'collects and arranges large masses of social data' (Risley 1891: xxvi); it thus dealt with the descriptive details about caste. Ethnology, on the other hand, 'applies the comparative method of investigation, and frames by this means hypotheses concerning the origin of the tribes themselves' (Risley 1891: xxvi). This separation of the fields of inquiry meant that while ethnography took care of sundry details, i.e. Brahmanical injunction, mythical history, etc., that were relevant for classifying castes, ethnology could demarcate a scientific domain for itself to offer a theoretical exposition about the origin of caste. The loose structure of the discipline allowed anthropology to be pressed in the service of both administration and the academy.

The exposition of caste in the ethnographic texts compiled during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and after was, thus, far from homogeneous. In the narrative presented in the *Tribes and Castes* volumes as well as the report on the census of 1901, the two

separate spheres, academic and administrative, were clearly identifiable. In the beginning of these texts there appeared an *ethnological* account ('Introduction' or 'Introductory Essay' in the *Tribes and Castes* volumes: see Risley 1891; Crooke 1896; Thurston & Rangachari 1909; Russell and Lal 1916) responsive to the research agenda of Western scholarly institutions. Then followed an *ethnographic* section where, as per the programme of the colonial state, either a glossary or a classification of castes was presented. The questions asked, the method followed, the informants contacted, and the audience addressed differed in the two accounts. Yet a crucial link also tied the two: ethnology was supposed to decode ethnography, the theory of caste was expected to help the state in its practice of classifying caste groups.

Referring to the writings of Risley, I examine the two narratives of caste. The ethnological explanation Risley had presented initially in *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*; this was further elaborated in the census report of 1901. The central purpose of this explanation was to reconstitute the idea of caste: its origin, history, and features, at a juncture when text-based concepts stood questioned and *jatis*, though enumerated as castes, revealed no common unifying features. The ethnographic version described the procedure followed during the census of 1901 to classify castes. Rather than corroborating, the ethnographic proceedings exposed the limits of ethnological knowledge and simultaneously revealed the role of divergent influences in the project of classification. Yet, despite the given differences, both ethnological and ethnographic elucidations contributed to the making of the idea of caste.

IIIa. Ethnology of Caste

In the 'Introductory Essay' entitled 'Caste in relation to marriage' that preceded the section on ethnographic findings from the survey of Bengal, Risley presented his ethnological formulations. Caste, in this account, was portrayed as an aspect of primitive society. The characterization was reached through several moves: caste was situated within an evolutionary paradigm and defined in universal terms; scientific theories and tools were applied to corroborate this definition; simultaneously, local connotations associated with the communities called castes were ignored and suppressed. The basis of caste, Risley

argued, was race (though Risley used physiological criteria to identify races, he was not the first to use the term in the Indian context: see Trautmann 1997: chapter 7). Drawing upon head, nose, and stature measurements, anthropometry detected the presence of distinct races underneath the caste names. By recognizing biology as the formative influence behind caste, what the ethnological exposition denied was the relevance of the sphere of the social; the social became merely a reflection of the biological. That caste was a form that had not evolved beyond the physical or natural state was held as the primary pointer of its primitive lineage.

Elaborating this hypothesis, Risley contended that the customs and practices hitherto used to judge the identity or status of castes were not authentic indicators. The original customs of the 'aboriginal tribes' had got distorted with 'the progress of the great religious and social movement' (Risley 1891: xv) called 'Brahmanism'. Brahmanism referred to the process whereby the 'aboriginal tribes' attempted 'to enrol themselves in one of the leading castes' (Risley 1891: xvi) of the 'Aryan Hindus' by emulating the customs and practices of the latter. This 'wholesale borrowing of customs and ceremonies which goes on among the various social groups in India', added Risley, 'makes it practically impossible to arrive at any certain conclusions by examining these practices' (Risley 1903: 493).

What then could reveal the authentic self of the various castes? In the midst of a continuous mixing of customs and practices, what had remained unaltered as a consequence of the practice of caste endogamy (which had prevented any large-scale intermixture of blood), Risley believed, were the physical features of these communities. And physical profiles could be traced with the help of anthropometry. Unlike Europe, where anthropometry felt 'hindered . . . by the constant intermixture of races', in India, Risley contended, it found a suitable 'field': 'Nowhere else . . . [do] we find the population of a large continent broken up into an infinite number of mutually exclusive aggregates, the members of which are forbidden . . . to marry outside . . . In a society thus organized . . . differences of physical type, however produced in past time . . . manifest a high degree of persistence, and that the science which seeks to trace and express such differences would find a peculiarly favourable field for its operations' (Risley 1891: xxvi–xxvii). Anthropometry did not merely discover

the races, it reconstituted the difference between Europe and India, between a civilized and a primitive society.

Anthropometrical measurements of 'nearly 6000 persons, representing 89 of the leading castes and tribes in Northern India' (Risley 1891: xxx–xxxi) were taken during the survey of Bengal. Though no physical statistics were collected during the census of 1901, Risley consulted such data gathered by individuals from other provinces before the present census (Risley 1903: 494). Drawing upon the available sources, he identified seven 'physical types' (Risley 1903: 500) living in India, of which three were primary: Aryan, Dravidian, and Mongoloid.²⁵ The Aryan and Dravidian represented the 'two extreme types of feature and physique' (Risley 1891: xxxi). The Aryans were 'marked by a relatively long (dolichocephalic) head; a straight, finely cut (lepto-rhine) nose . . . stature . . . fairly high . . . complexion . . . a very light transparent brown'; among the Dravidians, 'the head usually inclines to be dolichocephalic, but all other characters present a marked contrast to the Aryan. The nose is thick and broad . . . colour of the skin varies from very dark brown to a shade closely approaching black' (Risley 1891: xxxii).

In the continuance of these 'physical types' was located the rationale of caste and the origin of the 'caste system'. The presence of physical types affirmed, Risley argued, that 'the race sentiment . . . rests upon a foundation of fact' (Risley 1891: i–ii); it 'supplied the motive principle of caste' (Risley 1903: 489). The genesis of caste happened in the remote past when the Aryans, after making 'their way into India' (Risley 1903: 511), came into contact with the Dravidians. Anxious to maintain their racial purity, the former 'displayed . . . a marked antipathy to marriage with persons of alien race, and devised an elaborate system of taboo for the prevention' (Risley 1891: xxxviii) of such ties. Hence, Risley concluded, 'the motive principle of Indian caste is to be sought in the antipathy of the higher race for the lower, of the fair-skinned Aryan for the black Dravidian' (Risley 1891: xxxviii).

His explanation of the genesis of caste, Risley believed, was borne out by universal experience. 'Whenever in the history of the world one people has subdued another', he wrote, 'the conquerors have taken the women of the country as concubines or wives, but have given their . . . daughters in marriage only among themselves' (Risley 1903: 555). This partial check on intermarriage would be temporary where

the opposing groups belonged to the same race. 'Where on the other hand marked distinctions of race and colour intervene', the Census Commissioner explained, 'the . . . tendency . . . is towards the formation of a class of half-breeds . . . who marry among themselves and are to all intents and purposes a caste.' 'In this literal or physiological sense', he asserted, 'caste is not confined to India. It occurs . . . in the Southern States of the American Commonwealth, where Negroes intermarry with Negroes . . . [and] among the half-breeds of Canada, Mexico and South America' (Risley 1903: 555).

Western academic ideas when applied to colonies, I should add, did not escape modifications and distortions. For instance, Risley, drawing upon anthropological writings, had mentioned that the respective significance of the shape of the head and skin colour, for the purpose of identifying a race, varied; the former was a decisive indicator (Risley 1903: 497), the latter a non-definitive marker (Risley 1891: xxxii). Yet it was skin colour that was used to set Dravidians apart from Aryans, despite the fact that both carried a similar head-form (dolichocephalic).

Biology thus produced the motive for endogamy, the boundary that could demarcate a caste; biology also provided the means, in the shape of the nose, to assess the status of a caste. 'If we take a series of castes', Risley wrote, 'and arrange them . . . so that the caste with the finest nose shall be at the top, and that with the coarsest at the bottom, it will be found that this order substantially corresponds with the accepted order of social precedence' (Risley 1903: 498). A fine or coarse nose reflected the proportion of Aryan and/or Dravidian blood in a caste and hence held a clue to its status. It was therefore laid down as a 'law' that 'in those parts of India where there is an appreciable strain of Dravidian blood . . . the social status of the members of a particular group varies in inverse ratio to the mean relative width of their noses' (Risley 1903: 498).

The cognition of biology—skin colour, shape of nose, etc.—as the influence that produced and ordered caste was informed by a wider understanding of primitive societies. It was believed that in such societies, unlike in the Western world, the social (cor)responded to the call of the biological/natural. Thus Risley, who correlated the status of caste with the shape of noses, went on to assert that this was not the only instance where 'the two sets of observation—social and physical—bear out and illustrate each other' (Risley 1891: xxxiv). The 'social gradation

of the Indian caste system', he added, could be compared 'to a series of geological deposits' (Risley 1891: xxvii)—the 'lowest castes preserve the most primitive customs, just as the oldest geological formations contain the simplest forms of organic life' (Risley 1891: xxvii–xxviii; for the use of geological motifs in race theory, see Guha 1998: 425–7). The Dravidian was 'the oldest' (Risley 1903: 508), 'the most primitive' (Risley 1903: 506) of the Indian races, 'organized on a characteristic tribal basis' (Risley 1903: 516), observing 'animistic religion' and 'a primitive system of totemism' (Risley 1903: 508) where totems named after 'an animal, a tree, a plant' (Risley 1903: 530) designated the exogamous septs. The Aryans, on the other hand, were a later/newer entrant and therefore credited with more complex structures. They introduced the system of caste (caste was thus an Aryan institution), followed a distinct religion called Hinduism, and exogamous sections (*gotras*) within the highest Aryan castes were 'eponymous', i.e. these traced their descent from a 'mythical *rishi* or inspired saint' (Risley 1891: 1) rather than any animal or tree.

The evolutionary paradigm had a wider impact on colonial writings in the late nineteenth century than is often recognized. I illustrate this by identifying the premises shared by Denzil Ibbetson and Herbert Risley, scholars who have at times been contrasted to demonstrate the diversity in colonial ethnography (Bayly 2002: 126–43). Both scholars, though comprehending caste differently, undertook similar explanatory steps to arrive at their respective formulations. They began by pointing out that caste was originally produced by influences (e.g. occupational division, racial separation) operational also in other primitive societies. Both then proceeded to identify the present form of caste as a deviation from the universal trajectory and asked what might have caused it. Risley questioned why 'the Aryan race, which in South Europe . . . modified its physical type by free intermixture with Turanian elements, displayed in India a marked antipathy to marriage with persons of alien race?' The answer, he stated, lay 'in the fact that in India alone were the Aryans brought into close contact with an unequivocally black race' (Risley 1891: xxxviii).²⁶

Was the idea of deviation from the universal path applied only to comprehend caste, or was it an integral part of colonial representation of societies across Asia and Africa? Further, did the deviant state, as in the case of caste, signify the innate otherness of the colonized *vis-à-vis* Europeans? Here I address only the second question. Contrary to what

scholars (Inden 1990: 49, 57, 74; Metcalf 1995: 113–14, 120; Dirks 2002: 3–5) claim, caste, when explicated *within a universal paradigm*, was not seen as a form unique or peculiar to India; it was not a sign of India's otherness. Risley had traced the features of caste also among 'the half-breeds of Canada, Mexico and South America', and only 'in its most developed form', he believed, was the caste system 'confined to India' (Risley 1903: 496). Earlier, Ibbetson had argued that caste was not 'peculiar to the Hindu nation'. Rather, 'caste in India [was] what we call position or rank in England', although in the case of the former 'special circumstances have combined to preserve . . . the hereditary nature of occupation.' Yet, he concluded, it was 'a difference of degree rather than of kind' (Ibbetson 1883: 173). The denial of the uniqueness of caste was a precondition for the application of universal academic theories. For, the representation of Indian society as an inherently irrational entity would have questioned the very need or possibility of using any scientific theory to understand it. An object must be assumed to have properties amenable to scientific investigation to make it eligible to such an analysis. Thus, when ideas or customs shared by a people precluded the scope of rational inquiry, Risley made use of human bodies to incorporate India within a racial hypothesis and explain the genesis of caste.

The ethnological explanation, informed as it was by Western academic concepts, brought about a fundamental change in the status of Indians assisting the colonial projects. During the very early years of the census, revenue officials procured the population data; for caste-specific information they depended on local scholars, particularly those acquainted with Sanskrit texts. For instance, Plowden, during the census of the NWP in 1865, admitted that he was 'not in a position to add any information [on caste]'; that Siva Prasad, the Joint Inspector of Schools in the Benaras Circle, was preparing an 'alphabetical list' of castes which, when completed, would be of 'much value' (Plowden 1867: 92–3). In the following years two developments—the imposition of statistical order and the critique of *varna*—started circumscribing the role of Indians. Subsequently, ethnographic surveys, beginning in the aftermath of the 1881 census, generated a corpus of knowledge of caste that claimed authenticity by aligning itself not with Sanskrit texts but Western academic disciplines. It is quite revealing that though Risley thanked many Indians for assistance

during the survey of Bengal (Risley 1891: x), he acknowledged his intellectual debts exclusively to Western scholars: William Flower for the classification of race (Risley 1891: xxiii–xxiv), Paul Topinard for anthropometrical tools (Risley 1891: xxv–xxvi), J.F. McLennan and Henry Maine for marriage customs (Risley 1891: xlii), etc. Two qualifications need to be made here. Despite tracing its lineage to anthropological theories, the ethnological account of caste continued to repeat, as mentioned above, many of the conclusions drawn by the Sanskritists since the late eighteenth century. Secondly, though disputed and disregarded by colonial ethnographers, the indigenous intelligentsia—caste scholars as well as Brahmans—acquired greater reach and salience in the public domain precisely at a juncture when ethnology was laying claim over the intellectual exposition of caste. The two developments were not unrelated. Failing to explain the varied notions of caste shared by people with the help of his ethnological formulations, Risley invited public opinion during the census of 1901 to classify castes; the indigenous intelligentsia supplied caste histories, genealogical tables, and *vyavasthas* (injunctions citing Sanskrit texts) to corroborate community claims.

The themes of ethnological investigation, i.e. the origin and nature of caste, its characteristic markers, its place in the universal history of human societies, etc., confirm that this part of the inquiry was addressed to a European audience. There was little here that dealt with what was of central concern to the colonial state: the classification of castes. The distinction between academic and state-related dimensions was acknowledged in official correspondence. Regarding the survey of Bengal it had been decided, said Risley, that 'the scientific results arrived at by measurements [of caste-persons] should be kept distinct from purely ethnographic matter, and should be published in a separate volume.'²⁷ The results of the survey were subsequently published in four volumes, two containing anthropometric measurements and the other two furnishing an ethnographic glossary. Since the anthropometric volumes were of 'purely scientific interest', these were to be printed, Risley wrote, only in limited numbers 'for distribution to anthropological societies and savants in Europe.'²⁸ Yet, the knowledge that race was the basis of caste would be of little relevance to the colonial state; the ethnographic survey of Bengal was sponsored when statistical compilation of caste data had begun to prove intractable.

How far did the ethnology of caste succeed in facilitating the state's programme of classification, and what impact did the exercise have on the idea of caste?

IIIb. Ethnography of Caste

After covering 'the racial divisions' of the people in the chapter on 'Caste, Tribe, and Race' in the census report of 1901, Risley moved on to 'their social divisions, to the Ethnographic data as distinguished from the Ethnological' (Risley 1903: 514). Identifying and classifying castes was what the officials had found difficult from the very inception of the census operations; the situation was no different in 1901. In a statement reminiscent of the remarks of the Secretary of State in 1877, Risley complained that, when asked about his caste, a respondent might give the name of 'an obscure caste . . . a sect . . . a sub-caste . . . an exogamous sept . . . a hypergamous group . . . may describe himself by . . . occupation or . . . the province or tract of country from which he comes' (Risley 1903: 537). So, which among these was a caste? Circumstances demanded clarity on the issue; to count and collate, it was necessary to fix the identifying marker. Hence, in the census report of 1901, there appeared a 'definition' (Risley 1903: 517) of caste. Caste had several characteristics, Risley wrote; it 'may be defined as a collection of families . . . associated with a specific occupation; claiming common descent.' But more than anything else, caste was 'almost invariably endogamous' (Risley 1903: 517). In Sanskrit texts, Risley had discovered the 'Theory of the "mixed castes"' which spoke against intermarriages between Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra (Risley 1891: xxxvi; also Risley 1903: 546–8). In the ethnological section, he had linked the genesis of caste with the desire for maintaining racial purity through checks on the intermixture of blood. Informed by both Sanskrit texts and the theory of race, Risley upheld endogamy as the defining feature of an empirical caste system that replaced the *varna* model.

The proposed definition did not facilitate the enumeration of caste. Endogamy could not be tied to caste; other communities both within and outside India also practised it. Further, a large number of *jatis* enlisted as castes by Risley during his survey of Bengal were not actually endogamous. For example, within the fold of the Kurmi *jati* were

present the following groups: Awadhia, Chanaur, Ghamela, Jaiswar, etc. Erroneously called 'sub-castes' by many sociologists, these were the groups that actually practised endogamy: thus, an Awadhia would not marry a Ghamela or a Chanaur (Risley 1891: 530). Going by the academic criterion of endogamy, Awadhia or Chanaur and not Kurmi should be treated as a caste, and yet doing so would have completely violated popular opinion on the subject. Hence, Risley's definition of caste remained inapplicable.

Besides being erroneous, Risley's definition also threw serious doubt on the relationship between race and caste. If race was the basis of caste, why were there so many castes when there were only seven races living in India? Why did groups, ostensibly belonging to the same race, practise endogamy when there was no fear of any admixture of blood? These questions challenged the very sweep of universal science, the very claim of ethnology to explicate ethnography. The theory of race, Risley was convinced, was patently scientific. Crafted by renowned scholars in Europe, its corroborations came from both the universal experience of primitive societies and passages from ancient Sanskrit texts. The cause for the lack of fit between race and caste therefore had to be found elsewhere; it was located in the flawed nature of the people who did not recognize or remember the 'scientific' reasons that had led to the origin of caste. Caste, standing often as a synonym for India, was imagined differently in the ethnographic section. In Risley's ethnology caste was incorporated in a universal paradigm even if as a primitive social form; it was now represented as an exception to defend the inapplicability of 'scientific' theories.

The 'growth of caste sentiment', Risley explained, was rooted in 'a basis of fact and a superstructure of fiction.' The fact—of racial difference—was 'widespread'; it obtained in other societies too. The fiction that distorted the fact and led to the proliferation of castes was 'peculiar to India' (Risley 1903: 555). The fiction related to the widely shared belief that all those 'who speak a different language . . . worship different gods, eat different food, observe different customs . . . must be so unmistakably alien by blood that intermarriage with them is a thing not to be thought of' (Risley 1903: 556). The influence of fiction, Risley admitted, was noted in 'early societies in all parts of the world'; it had however been 'greatly promoted and stimulated' in this country by 'certain characteristic peculiarities of the Indian intellect'

(Risley 1903: 556). The Indian intellect that displayed an 'essentially particularist instinct' (Risley 1903: 522); a 'tendency to *morcellement*' (Risley 1903: 523), was characterized by 'its phenomenal memory, its feeble grasp of . . . fact, its subtle manipulation of impalpable theories, its scanty development of the critical faculty' (Risley 1903: 546, also 556).

The disdain for the Indian intellect extended to what was called the Indian theory of caste. Risley referred to 'the myth of the four castes' (the four-*varna* schema) (Risley 1903: 556) as the source of that 'grotesque scheme of social evolution' known as the 'caste system' (Risley 1903: 547). The myth first appeared 'in its most elaborate form in the tenth chapter of the curious jumble of magic, religion, law, custom, ritual, and metaphysics . . . called the Institutes of Manu' (Risley 1903: 546–7). Significantly, in the ethnological section, while explaining the origin of caste Risley had appraised the Sanskrit texts differently. When extending his universal paradigm across society and history, he had found illustrations of his ideas of race in these texts: 'the data obtained by the most modern anthropological method agree in the main . . . with the long chain of Indian tradition, beginning with the Vedas' (Risley 1891: xxxiv–xxxv). He went on to assert that 'the standard Indian theory of caste may deserve more respectful consideration than has been accorded to it of late years' (Risley 1891: xxxv). Yet, when confronted with the task of identifying and classifying castes, a situation that seemed to dispute his ethnological findings, Risley blamed the same Sanskrit texts as the source of peoples' irrational beliefs.

As a student of race science, Risley could remain content after attributing the presence of multiple castes to the function of 'fiction'; however, as the Census Commissioner he was still obliged to classify these groups. Hence, he asked the question raised so many times in the past: 'on what principle should they [castes] be arranged?' (Risley 1903: 537). The 'law' of 'inverse ratio' linking the status of a caste with the 'mean relative width' of its nose, that Risley had propounded, was of little help. It failed to explain why the status of castes apparently belonging to the same race, thus having the same nasal index, should differ? In any case, the respective status of castes in any region did not follow the sequence of their nasal index. Failed by his ethnology, Risley finally decided to invite 'public opinion' to undertake a 'classification [of castes] by social precedence' (Risley 1903: 538).

In response to the Census Commissioner's decision, a 'great number of petitions' (Risley 1903: 539) were apparently submitted by various castes laying claim over their self-perceived status. What did Risley discover in these claims? Public opinion, he contended, underlined 'the predominance . . . of the traditional system of four original castes' (Risley 1903: 539). The caste tables from the various provinces showed, he added, that 'the Brahman heads the list. Then come the castes whom popular opinion accepts as the modern representative of the Kshatriyas, and these are followed by . . . the Vaisyas' (Risley 1903: 539).

The limits of Risley's anthropological project were now fully exposed. When reviewing 'the Indian theory of caste', Risley had concluded, like his empirically informed predecessors, that the principle of Manu had no 'foundation in fact' (Risley 1903: 546). Yet, Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya were found suitable as categories for classification precisely at a stage when the claim of science over caste was unequivocal and when empirical investigations extended from social customs to human body. The new-found acceptability of these categories with the Brahman at the top ensued from their trans-local presence and the importance that Risley assigned to the Sanskrit texts to interpret the traditions and beliefs of the people.

The *varna* names thus became the constant constituents of the new pan-Indian caste system. This was not, however, as Dirks (Dirks 2002: 210, 213, 218) would like to believe, an instatement of the 'textual' schema, for several reasons. The schema had already lost its legitimacy: empirical tests had pronounced it non-existent; in Risley's ethnography it exemplified the irrational mindset of a people. Further, Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya, when accommodated in the census tables, were shorn off their wider connotations and narrowly interpreted as hierarchical rungs in a ladder-like caste system. Finally, the *varna* format, as I illustrate below, was restricted, redefined, and compromised by the interventions of race science and the compulsions of statistical arrangement.

How did the idea of race influence the classification of castes? Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya, Risley believed, belonged to 'the ancient Aryan Commonwealth' (Risley 1891: xxxv). Hence, any claim over these ranks had to be corroborated with reference to Sanskrit texts, the observance of Sanskritic rituals, *vyavasthas* (injunctions) from Brahmans, etc. The Shudras, Risley had speculated, were

'apparently not of pure Aryan descent' and could have been affiliated to the 'Dravidian elements' (Risley 1891: xxxv). Hence, instead of Sanskritic traditions, a host of local customs and practices, i.e. the acceptance of water from them by Brahmans, the prevalence of infant marriage and widow remarriage, the capacity to pollute other castes (Risley 1903: 538), etc., were taken into account by census officials to assess their status. Guided by ethnographic observations, deemed Shudra castes were placed in many provincial reports of the 1901 census in the newly named brackets, redefining in the process their identity and status. Thus, *varna* names existed alongside the new classificatory terms in the census tables that purportedly laid out the structure of caste society as existing in the different regions.

The classification of castes was also shaped by statistical considerations. One of the statistical moves aimed at facilitating the compilation of data with a significant bearing on questions of identity and status was that of accommodating a number of castes within a single large class. For example, in Bengal all those castes whose names appeared with the suffix 'Brahman' were collectively placed in the census table, irrespective of their mutual differences in status, under the column 'Brahman'. Referring to such discrepancies, Risley wrote: 'As everyone knows, there are Brahmans and Brahmans [in Bengal], of status varying from Rarhi, who claim to have been imported by Adisura from Kanauj, to the Barna Brahmans . . . from whose hands pure Brahmans will not take water. No attempt has been made to deal with these multifarious distinctions in the Table. It would be a thankless task to attempt to determine the precise degree [of such differences]' (Risley 1903: 540).

To illustrate the divergent influences shaping the classification of castes, I present below an abridged version of the tables that Risley had compiled after drawing upon provincial census reports (Risley 1903: 560–6).

As shown above, the ethnological knowledge denoted by racially demarcated tracts headed the table but was evidently at a remove from the social sphere. The representation of the social sphere bore the telltale signs of contradictory pulls, fracturing it along the lines of conflict and thereby denying it any epistemic unity. In the table, the Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya occupied the higher echelons, but these classes could barely contain or represent the entire gamut of

Social Grouping of the Indo-Aryan Tract (Ajmer, Rajputana . . .)	Social Grouping of the Scytho- Dravidian Tract (Bombay, Baroda . . .)	Social Grouping of the Dravidian Tract (Madras, Mysore . . .)	Social Grouping of the Aryo- Dravidian Tract (United Provinces, Bihar)
Class I—Brahmans	I—Brahmans	I—Brahman and allied castes	I—Brahmans and others
Class II—Kshatriyas or allied to Kshatriyas . . .	II—Kshatriyas	II—Kshatriya and allied castes	II—Castes allied to Brahman . . .
Class III—Vaishyas or trading castes	III—Vaishyas	III—Vaishya and allied castes	III—Kshatriyas
Class IV—Castes from whom members of the higher castes can take <i>pakki</i> and water . . .	IV—Shudras	IV— <i>Sat</i> or good Shudras . . .	IV—Castes allied to Kshatriyas though their claim is not universally admitted
Class VII— Untouchables	V—Depressed class whose touch is supposed to pollute	VIII—Castes which pollute even without touching	V—Vaishya . . . without

public opinion. To accommodate the divergent claims, enumerators were compelled to introduce, through statistical interventions, novel groups of 'castes allied to' the three *varnas*. Further, below the *varnas*, though ostensibly populating the same social space, were communities defined arbitrarily by selecting one or the other aspect of their customs and practices (e.g. 'castes from whom members of the higher castes can take water', 'castes which pollute even without touching', etc.).

By not insisting on applying the criteria of endogamy, nasal index, etc. to determine the identity or status of castes, this ethnographic practice was able to conceal the incommensurability between ethnological conceptualizations and social perceptions on the subject. Colonial documents carried a sense of familiarity precisely because the people were to a certain extent able to record in these, in the course of the ethnographic surveys, their notions of community. Yet, the caste tables, as argued above, were not entirely a reflection of the existing social arrangements. More importantly, in and through the very format of statistical classification, the ethnographic exercise of the census constituted and corroborated on an empirical plane the idea of a linear caste hierarchy.

A comparison between the representations of caste in the academic and administrative spheres reveals the heterogeneity within what is indiscriminately called colonial knowledge. In his ethnological account, Risley had placed India within the sweep of universal history; the concept of race was the common tool used to map, characterize, and equate societies in Asia and Africa. As a manifestation of racial distinction, caste was interpreted as another primitive social form. The difference between advanced and primitive societies was not considered innate, share as these did the point of departure in their journey on the path of civilization. The point deserves further attention given the widely held opinion (Inden 1990: 60–4, Metcalf 1995: 83–5) that Risley, by linking caste with race, had placed the colonized permanently in an inferior position *vis-à-vis* the colonizer.

When comparing Aryans with Dravidians, Risley placed them hierarchically: the former were credited with a complex social structure and deemed in general to be more advanced (Risley 1903: 506–8, 530; also Risley 1891: 1). However, I believe the comparison was more a reflection of the continuing influence of knowledge produced by the Sanskritists since the late eighteenth century. For, in his academic opinion, Risley did not endow races with unequal potential; in fact, he argued against such gradations: ‘people with long heads cannot be said to be cleverer or more advanced in culture than people with short heads’ (Risley 1903: 497). In any case, the question of comparing races in India with those in Europe and calling the former inferior did not arise. Race, for Risley, was a signifier of primitiveness; contemporary Europe was the abode of civilization, no races were to be found there any more, these having already amalgamated to evolve into nations (Risley 1903: 496). Most importantly, the idea of socio-cultural evolution, on which Risley’s ethnology rested, would have prevented him from either permanently hierarchizing races or proposing an inherent difference between the colonizer and the colonized. The assumption that ‘there be a single cultural ladder by which man could have climbed unassisted from brute savagery to European civilization’ (Stocking 1987: 177) entailed that no race could be denied that route, or singled out as permanently inferior. Risley’s ethnological explanation, therefore, was racial, not racist; both biology/nature and culture were wedded here in what Stocking called, when discussing the formation of anthropology in Britain, ‘a Victorian compromise’ (Stocking 1987: 272) to chart a single line of evolution.

The image of Indian society was fundamentally altered once the science of race stepped outside the domain of ethnology and started losing its way in a colony of castes. Instead of comparing India with other societies, primitive or advanced, the Census Commissioner, in his ethnographic description, repeatedly referred to the country's alleged peculiarities. The ethnographic caste became the quintessential sign of India's innate irrationality, its otherness *vis-à-vis* Europe. For the evolutionary theory, the categories of the *primitive* and the *irrational* carried contrasting implications: the former was a part of the universal history of progress; the latter, though produced because of the same theory, lay outside. The respective status of tribe and caste in Risley's ethnography illustrates this difference: tribe represented a primitive structure, the original social form associated with any race; caste, though admitted to be more complex, stood in contravention to the universal trajectory that foreclosed for it any prospect of progress. Thus, in Europe, races could evolve into nations as a 'result of unrestricted crossing which . . . fused a number of distinct tribal types into a . . . national type'; in India, because of the functioning of caste, such a 'process of fusion' had long been 'arrested'. Consequently, Risley concluded, there was 'no national type and no nation' in India (Risley 1903: 496).

The mismatch between ethnographic description and ethnological theorization casts a different light on the status of anthropology, a metropolitan discipline, in a colonial situation. There exists another history buried in the image of irrational Indians. This is not a tale about the triumph of European science and the marginalization of the colonized as the 'other'; rather, it tells us how the category of the irrational itself set and signified the limits of universal knowledge. Questioning the singular claim of Western knowledge to represent the colonized, this history intimates us about the presence of two domains, interconnected and yet separate. The first was the sphere of intellectual formulations where, informed by the premises of academic disciplines and extant theories, scholars processed information culled from colonies to fabricate systemic knowledge of social forms, e.g. caste. Exposed to, though not configured by, the first was the other arena of colonial relations characterized by instances of contestation and convergence involving academic institutions, the colonial state, and communities.

Moving within and between multiple narratives—administrative

and statistical, ethnological and ethnographic—caste shows a troubled presence in the pages of the census reports. No exhaustive list of castes could ever be prepared for any province, let alone for the country as a whole; no two reports on the census of India ever matched in the way these classified castes; no inventory of caste was ever compiled without the presiding Census Commissioner expressing misgivings about the whole project. The enumeration of caste continued, given its deemed administrative relevance; however, no sooner had the pan-Indian census started than the state was compelled to try and trim down its engagement with the subject. During the census of 1881 it was decided that only those castes with a minimum numerical strength of 100,000 would be classified; after 1901, following Risley's failure to construct a pan-Indian classificatory table, the practice of classifying castes in the census itself was given up; castes from now onwards were enlisted alphabetically. In 1931, the last general counting of castes took place. Despite these failings, however, the very structure of the census first generated and then sustained the belief that caste was a uniformly definable and empirically verifiable entity.

Conclusion

The *idea* of caste, as conceived in contemporary academic writings and applied in the framing of state policies, was produced in the course of the census operations in colonial India. In the text-based explanations offered by Sanskritists since the late eighteenth century, the Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra were treated as authentic castes; *jatis* enjoyed no distinct conceptual status, the assumption being that these could be subsumed, at least theoretically, within the *varna* order. The onset of the census operations from the middle of the nineteenth century signalled fundamental changes. Empirical surveys showed the *varna* division to be non-existent; the focus now shifted to the numerous *jatis* populating the social space. The project entailed that these diverse *jatis* be first counted, and then classified within a new pan-Indian template. The obligation was novel and unparalleled. The *jatis*, along with their assumed numerical strength, had been enlisted earlier too; however, these communities stood in such lists as discrete units. The summing up of number in the census, on the other hand, was possible only if the entities counted were made comparable. The

compulsion, under the circumstances, was to find features common to the otherwise divergent *jatis*, so that these could be defined and demarcated uniformly. In search of such defining features, the state started investing in ethnographic surveys and was gradually drawn into a nexus, which was not always complementary, with the Western academic complex. Consensus eluded (and still eludes) any definition of caste. Nevertheless, the anthropological investigations carried out alongside the project of statistical classification eventually produced a dogma—of caste being an empirically verifiable entity with a uniform and fixed boundary across the country. Ethnology supplied a singular tale of origin (racial, occupational, etc.), an account of subsequent history, and a set of defining features to caste; ethnography, though not adhering to ethnological formulations when identifying and classifying castes, nevertheless imparted a structure of linear hierarchy to this institution. The pan-Indian architecture of caste included the *varna* names. Though much doubted on empirical grounds, these categories, because of being known beyond a locality, could still serve the state's agenda of classifying the *jatis*. However, in the course of their selective appropriation, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra were first *empiricalized* and then interpreted as merely denoting ranks. Boundary and hierarchy thus became the two dimensions characterizing the new caste system conceived in the context of counting and classification.

Caste, I believe, cannot be equated either with *varna* or *jati*. The *varna* order is not indeterminate; yet it is not empirically verifiable. The presence of *jatis*, on the other hand, can be observed; however, these never had a singular and uniform identity in Indian society. Even a small sample from a census report, compiled after an unprecedented application of anthropological theories and tools to unequivocally identify castes, illustrates the point. Some of the names included in the caste table of the report on the census of Bengal in 1901 were the following: Chamar, Halwai, Baniya, Madrasi, Marwari, Manipuri, Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Bengali, Maratha, Sikh, Baishnab (Bairagi), Buddhist, Munda, Santal, Oraon, Ahir, Kurmi, Barnasankar, etc. (Gait 1902: 192–266). Tentatively, these communities can be described as professional, regional (both from within and outside the country), linguistic, religious/sectarian, tribal (according to the records of the state), and only locally known groups. The question

that must be asked here is the following: what is common between, say, Chamar, Marwari, Munda, and Kurmi that qualifies these to be parts of a list of castes? How can we decide whether 'Baniya' is a caste or not? The only factor that seems to be uniting the names that form the list of castes cited above is that these are seen to belong to different communities. *Jati*, in the first place, then, signifies a community. Caste on the other hand is also imagined as a community but a community of a *particular* type. The particularity of caste is inscribed in the features attributed to it: a uniform boundary marked through the practice of endogamy, a definite and singular hierarchy with perhaps the Brahman at the top and the so-called untouchables at the bottom, a specific set of practices relating to commensality, etc. These particularities do not uniformly apply to the *jatis* and this is why *jati*, as understood in indigenous traditions and society, is not the same as caste.

Caste thus is fundamentally different from both *varna* and *jati*; yet, because of its associations with both *varna* names and *jati* practices struck in the course of the census operations, it has been misconceived as a component of indigenous society. To illustrate this, let us explore what the expression 'Brahman caste', so commonly used in both academic and everyday parlance, could mean. Translated textually, 'Brahman *varna*' cannot denote a group of people physically existing, though that is the idea the word labours to convey. Its empirical rendering as 'Brahman *jati*', on the other hand, would be fallacious—there has never been nor could there ever be a *jati* in Indian society called Brahman. Kanyakubja Brahman, Maithil Brahman, Namboodiri Brahman, Chitpavan Brahman, etc., are some of the groups regarded in the census reports as Brahman castes. Significantly, in all these names, the word Brahman neither comes alone, nor as a prefix. It is conjoined as a suffix and actually appears as part of the identity of the diverse *jatis*. In similar fashion, the question 'what is caste?', routinely asked in classrooms and beyond, generates an ambiguous sense. Is the question about *varna* or is it about *jati*? These two, I have repeatedly emphasized, are not identical questions and therefore anticipate different answers.

Caste, hence, is an idea of recent origin that emerged by displacing the text-based *varna* order on the one hand and suppressing the multifariousness of *jatis* on the other. Though there was no prior design shaping its production, a pan-Indian caste system in its empirical

avatar appeared initially towards the close of the nineteenth century in the documents of the state. Hence, the use of the category of caste in place of *varna* and *jati* in historical explanations of Indian society, and in the framing of policies by the state in contemporary times, can only be misleading. I should perhaps add before I conclude that I am not trying to suggest that there was no hierarchy or discrimination in society before the birth of caste. Both *varna* and *jati*, which have been different and yet interacting parts of indigenous traditions since ancient times, carry their respective notions of hierarchy. In fact, I believe that, by avoiding the linear structure of hierarchy as presented within the caste system, we might better understand the specific constituents of authority that have operated in Indian society.

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Notes

1. Thus, the castes of the Central Province were placed in eleven, Madras in seventeen, and Bengal in thirteen groups (Waterfield 1875: 21).
2. Asia, Pacific and Africa Collection, British Library, London (hereafter APAC), Statistics and Commerce Department (hereafter SCD), L/E/2/84, Register 5393, No. 34, March 1880.
3. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/56, Register 1001, no. 58, April 1877.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, nos. 382–4, January 1878.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, no. 962, June 1878.
12. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, no. 1572A, June 1878.
13. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/56, Register 1001, no. 58, April 1877.
14. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, no. 34, March 1880.
15. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, nos. 382–84, January 1878.

16. Ibid.
17. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, no. 2287, August 1878.
18. APAC, SCD, L/E/2/84, Register 5393, no. 580C, August 1878.
19. APAC, SCD, L/E/7/73, Register 521, no. 1840, August 1882.
20. APAC, SCD, L/E/7/73, Register 521, no. 91 ½, January 1884.
21. APAC, SCD, L/E/7/215, Register 264/90, number not given, March 1890.
22. APAC, Mss. Eur. E100, folios 8–11.
23. APAC, SCD, L/E/7/226, Register 1165/90, no. 26, July 1890.
24. APAC, Revenue, Statistics and Commerce Department, L/E/7/440, Register 3306, no. 368, November 1900
25. The 'seven main physical types' were: Turko-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongolo-Dravidian, Mongoloid and Dravidian (Risley 1903: 500).
26. Acknowledging that the rigidity of caste was not characteristic of other occupationally arranged societies, Ibbetson blamed the Brahmans for using their sacred office 'to preserve . . . and . . . perpetuate . . . the hereditary nature of occupation' (Ibbetson 1883: 173).
27. APAC, Proceedings of the Government of India (hereafter GOI), Home Department, Public Branch, P/3879, Proceeding 112, 1891, month not given.
28. APAC, GOI, Home Department, Public Branch, P/3879, Proceeding 115, February 1891. The list of recipients included both the academic institutions, i.e. the Royal Societies of London, Edinburgh, and Dublin, the universities of London, Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Dublin, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Anthropological Society of London, etc. (APAC, GOI, Home Department, Public Branch, P/3879, Proceeding 121, May 1891); and scholars, i.e. William Flower, Paul Topinard, Francis Galton, E.B. Taylor, Adolf Grunwelel, etc. (APAC, Government of Bengal, General Department, Miscellaneous Branch, P/4089, Proceeding 66, 1892, month not given).

The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste*

FRANK F. CONLON

Historians seeking to understand questions relating to religion and caste in modern India may find the census of India to be an extensive and valuable source. There are many facts and many numbers and, alas, many limitations. Throughout the first century of decennial census reports, 1871–1971, data have been provided on religious identity as returned by individuals. On the other hand, apart from information on the so-called Scheduled Castes and Tribes, most documentation on caste returns was published only during Britain's domination of India. The census volumes of British India and the Indian States dating between 1871 and 1931 abound in statistics and commentary regarding the institution of caste and its various manifestations. These appear not only in the enumeration of the population according to its reported religious and caste identities. There are in addition data arranged with respect to questions of age, sex and geographical distribution, civil condition, education, health, and occupation.

It is not my intention to define narrowly either 'religion' or 'caste' as subjects of historical study, nor to stipulate research strategies for those

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who would study these topics. This essay will adopt the perspective of any scholar with *some* conception of 'caste' or 'religion' who might come to the published census record for material to illuminate a particular research problem. It does not directly address the question which has been raised before regarding the extent to which the census enumerations, particularly those of caste, reflected official British perceptions of Indian society rather than any social reality.¹ It is unquestionably true that the enduring interest of the British in caste as a system, which both divided and ranked their Indian subjects, produced an extensive response among those subjects, and also sometimes created new categories by statistical sleight of hand or administration fiat. It must also be admitted that the people of India themselves already had ideas concerning individual and corporate social and religious identities. Conflicts over caste precedence and ranking had a history more ancient than the period of the British census.² Still it must be acknowledged that the process of official enquiry and enumeration began to feed back into the society in such a manner as to influence subsequent responses to census enquiries. Professor Jones' essay on 'Religious Identity and the Indian Census' speaks to this issue directly in the critical context of the growth of communal politics in the Punjab.³ The census operations certainly provided significant orientations for the scholarly study of caste as seen in a large number of former census commissioners who subsequently wrote standard works on the subject: the names of E.J. Kitts, H.H. Risley, H.A. Rose, J.A. Baines, D. Ibbetson, R.E. Enthoven, E. Thurston, E.A.H. Blunt, and J.H. Hutton come to mind.

In this essay I wish to review briefly the range of data which were collected, digested, and presented in census operations which may throw light on caste and religion. In addition, I will consider some of the problems arising in the processes of enquiry and enumeration which influenced the data with which historians must come to terms, turning to my own research experience in working on the history of a caste to illustrate a few of the shortcomings of census materials, intending not a counsel of despair, but invoking a prudent caution.

Religion has found a place in every census of India from 1871 through 1971, although conceptual details and emphasis have varied. The actual enumeration recorded each person's religious identity as given by that person to the census representative. Since enumerators

frequently visited heads of households to collect information, it may not be clear that what was recorded was the status given by the individual, but rather what was given for an individual by an elder, or by the enumerator's exercise of observant common-sense.

Religion was normally entered under general rubrics—Hindu, Muslim or Mohammedan, Jew, Christian, Parsi or Zoroastrian, Sikh, Jain, and in some years 'Animist' (to cover tribal religions not definitely tied to one of the great religious traditions).⁴ While in some provinces sectarian affiliations were subjects of particular concern, as in the instance of the Virashaivas of Bombay, sectarian data was pursued particularly in the minority religious identities, e.g. Sunni and Shia among Muslims, Shahenshahi and Kadmi among Zoroastrians, and Svetambara and Digambara among Jains. Enumeration of Christians in British India was complicated by racial distinctions between Europeans, Anglo-Indians, and Indian Christians, and further subdivided according to denominations. Sectarian affiliations were last recorded in the 1931 census. A scholar interested in sect figures should be aware that sometimes 'sect' was treated as 'caste' and hence entered, in the case of the Muslims and Parsis at least, under the tabulation of 'caste, tribe, and race' rather than religion. One difficulty in such disaggregated figures lies in the fact that the details and the criteria of such entries varied from province to province and from census to census—reflecting the range of variety within India's population and the particular concerns of her rulers at a given time. Consistency is not one of the enduring virtues of the census of India.

Once individuals had been counted according to their religion, it followed that they might be tabulated with respect to other subjects of enquiry. The aggregated religious data were also tabulated on subjects of sex composition, marital status, literacy and education and, after 1881, occupation. In some instances this system was followed imperfectly. An overriding official concern about educational standing of Muslims led to a remarkable, and meaningless, enumeration in the Madras 1871 census where tables on education and literacy lumped together Hindus, Jains, and Christians.⁵

As Professor Jones has pointed out in greater detail, the matters of definition were often controversial. In an era of religious proselytizing a decennial census could, like a corporation's yearly report, show 'how they were doing'. Rates of recruitment or loss of members might be

easily deduced. Comparative religion as competitive religion could and did become a common theme, particularly where religious identity came to have political significance. The relative positions of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims in the Punjab or Hindus and Christians in the states of Travancore and Cochin were vital issues in those regions. The inherently quantitative nature of the census reports served to reinforce public attention on the causes and consequences of numerical growth or decline. More than one writer read the published census data on religion and argued that different growth rates for different religious groups would have dire results in the future.⁶

While such concerns could be engendered by a sense of competition for appropriate shares of the patronage and privilege of an imperial 'broker-government', the census findings were also interpreted to justify selected reform measures. Thus, when the rate of population increase among Hindus appeared to be lower than that among Muslims, it was suggested that this was a symptom of evil social customs of child marriage and infant widowhood, which ought to be abolished.⁷

There is, until the 1961 census, a qualitative problem regarding the religious returns, arising from the enumeration system, in which we know that officials authorized only a limited number of choices of religious identification. Scholars who now approach the census figures must assume that these tabulations represent reasonably accurate representations of the returned religious affiliations of individuals, save that the majority of returns were usually lumped into a general category. Thus the 1921 Bombay census included three categories of Hindu, but two of them, Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj, were somewhat irrelevant, there being counted 21,027,478 Hindu-Brahmanic persons to 1512 Aryas and 4 Brahmos.⁸ It also cannot be assumed that all twenty-one million 'Hindu-Brahmanics' were a homogeneous population with closely similar intensities of belief or traditions of practice. Thus, the most successful applications of census analysis in the category of religion may remain those studies which accept the gross figures as having been symbolically or politically important, and which explore correlations of religious identities with data on education or occupation. An example would be the refutation of the classical wisdom concerning the relative deprivation of Muslims in nineteenth-century India.⁹

Caste was regularly enumerated in the census reports of British

India from 1871 through 1941. Since 1951 only persons belonging to 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Scheduled Tribes', for whom the Government of India was evolving a policy of protective discrimination, were tabulated. In its day, the caste topic was one of the most controversial. Complexities of caste within each region and across India provided bases of uncertainty. In 1932 an eminent Indian sociologist, G.S. Ghurye, attributed the presence of caste items in the census to British initiative: 'The conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the early officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given to it in the Census, which has become progressively elaborate in each successive Census since 1872.'¹⁰

However accurate this observation may be, it is worth noting that some British officers were very pessimistic about the possibility of generating accurate census data on caste. W.R. Cornish, who superintended the 1871 Madras census, commented that caste was 'a subject upon which no two divisions or sub-divisions of the people themselves are agreed and upon which European authorities who have paid any attention to it differ hopelessly.'¹¹ R.E. Enthoven, superintendent of the Bombay census of 1901 admitted that to ignore caste completely 'would be to omit from consideration one of the most interesting aspects of Indian society *as it presents itself through the medium of a Census enumeration*.'¹² Nevertheless he later urged the discontinuation of caste tabulations. It was extremely costly in terms of hours of preparation, clerical work, and printing. What was worse, it was uncertain. Enthoven argued that the concept of caste 'is so hopelessly vague that our figures are useless' and he urged that 'recording of castes at the Indian censuses should be abandoned' or at least done only every twenty years.¹³

By the early twentieth century, the Ethnographic Survey of India was well under way and the various 'Castes and Tribes' volumes began to appear. It seemed that census enumeration could reduce the ethnographic coverage given to caste. By then, however, the caste reporting had taken on a life of its own in that the Indians themselves now looked with great interest upon what the census tables might tell them of the rate of progress and general condition of their own caste, or of a larger category to which the census assigned them.¹⁴

Apart from the problem of administrative costs, the census officers faced what may best be described as a glut of data. The 1871–2

censuses, which were carried out without standardized form or simultaneous enumeration, were absolutely swamped with details of caste nomenclature. Attempting to tabulate all responses without editorial intervention led to highly improbable recordings of castes whose total membership appeared to be less than a dozen. Clearly this would not do. From 1881 through 1931, census officers laboured to make the vast array into a somewhat realistic but manageable system. Castes were gradually grouped into 'orders' which could provide a basis for gross aggregation at provincial and all-India levels. In 1881 the proliferation of caste names returned stimulated publication of 'caste index' volumes which sought to systematize the categories and bring order out of chaos. Enumerators were told to be certain that all individuals counted in the census 'fit' into the categories. This led to a reduction in the numbers of castes enumerated. Where 333 castes were listed in the 1881 Punjab census, only 238 appeared by 1911.¹⁵ While some of this reduction was a response simply to an administrative imperative, it was also true that individuals known objectively to be members of one caste often gave in other 'caste' names, apparently either because of the context of the enumerators' questions, or uncertainty as to what level of specificity the census desired.¹⁶

The official attempts to create all-India and province-wide categories of castes of equal status and rank stimulated contentious representations by members of would-be upwardly mobile castes, seeking to raise their rank. In some cases the officially created categories were most peculiar indeed. One example would be that of the diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic Madras Presidency. There the otherwise very distinctive Kannada- and Tulu-speaking Bants of South Kanara district were lumped in with Telugu-speaking Naidus of Nellore and Tamil-speaking Kavares of Salem.¹⁷

In spite of these ethnographic manipulations, the caste sections of the census volumes continued to grow. The 1891 Bombay census devoted full 45.6% (247) of its pages on British territory to caste-related tables.¹⁸ This inflation was partly due to the inclusion of more sophisticated correlations of caste figures with other variables such as education, traditional occupation, infirmities, and marital status. By 1901 there was a marked tendency to give such information only for selected castes, chosen for numerical strength in a given province or division, or because of official perceptions of the group as being

influential. 'Representative examples' came to be utilized more and more. Thus scholars who wish to study a particular caste may or may not find full reportage for their selected group even within one province, much less all of India. In Madras, rearrangement of data categories on Brahmans in 1901 meant that small but influential Brahman castes of the west coast were swallowed up in a residual category of 'Brahman—Other' since their mother-tongue was not Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, or Oriya.¹⁹ In 1911 and 1921 distribution of castes by locality was tabulated with selected data on migration for certain castes. In the same years special attention was given to the occupations of selected castes, including separate tables on caste identities of owners and managers of factories.²⁰

The census of 1931 was, in effect, the last occasion for extensive reporting of caste data. The 1941 census reports were curtailed drastically because of war-time budget constraints, although caste was enumerated. In Bombay, at least, the provincial government published a small 'Caste Table' to report the census results. The paper could have been saved, for the figures did not betray much accuracy. A tendency among members of Brahmans to return themselves simply by *varna* identity skewed the enumeration of individual groups. The well-known Chitpavan Brahman caste, it appeared, had reduced its population from 113,605 in 1901 to merely 23,812 forty years later.²¹ This was a better than zero population growth, but it was only through census vagaries.

The obvious flaws in the caste figures over the decades would have probably led to the demise of the elaborate data collection simply on the grounds that no convincing time series could be established, even had an independent Government of India abolished the coverage on grounds of political and social policy. During the twentieth century, the census reports moved away from extensive ethnographic enquiries. In 1901 and 1911 there were elaborate investigations relating to rank-ordering of castes and the internal governance and dispute-settling mechanisms of caste and tribal groups. Thereafter, other questions seemed more vital. The Indian Industrial Commission of 1916–18 criticized the absence of sufficient economic data from the earlier censuses. In 1921 and thereafter, more energy was given over to enquiries concerning industrial and commercial activities.²²

This then is the broad outline of the reportage of caste and religion in the census reports of British India. The census volumes represent

an extraordinary collection of data. If used cautiously they may prove to be of great utility in many scholarly projects. Nonetheless it should be clear that several general reservations remain. Historians and others have often read and quoted the narrative portions of the census reports, possibly being uncomfortable with quantitative analysis techniques. Of late, however, the rise of 'quantitative history', as it is sometimes called, has brought historians to the statistical meat of the census tables. It bears repeating, however, that the narrative portions of the reports cannot be ignored. Often they provide vital qualifications or observations on the quantitative data. It is especially sobering to spend some time also consulting the Administrative Report volumes, which usually include valuable information on the background and circumstances of the census operations. It is important that one not only be alerted to the questions which the census officers asked, but also the ways in which the answers were interpreted.

This does not mean that all census data will then become clearly understandable or consistent. Enumeration and tabulation involved many pitfalls in conception and execution. The conception of what was a caste, that is, what was a 'real caste' as opposed to a 'subcaste', constantly agitated the census-taking process. The 1881 Madras 'Caste Index' listed groups under two headings, 'major' and 'minor' so that one finds entries such as 'Brahman, Saraswat'; or 'Brahman, Other', etc. What might alarm the most devout practitioner of the counting arts would be the substantial minority of individuals who would end up being indexed as 'Other, Other.' Indeed, much to the concern of the census superintendent, 47 per cent of the Hindus of Madras could not be classified as to minor subdivisions.²³ In 1891 a group, the Ambiga, were entered as a subcaste of the Kabbera caste and the Kabbera as a subcaste of the Ambiga. The symmetry of this arrangement may actually have reflected status and locality variations, but ten years later it was officially settled that the Kabbera were the main caste, and Ambiga a subcaste designation—at least for census purposes.²⁴

On copying out of names from census registers, the enumerators might stumble when two groups had similar names. Taking another example from Madras, 'in Telugu, "Gollan" means a shepherd and in Tamil "Kollan" means a blacksmith. But in Tamil G and K are represented by the same letter so that a Telugu shepherd living in a Tamil district ran every risk of being returned as a blacksmith by

caste.’²⁵ Scholars who are mindful of the uses of manuscript census schedules in American social history might hope to get beyond these confusions by examining the original record. My knowledge on this point is not definitive, but I can report that I have not been able to locate, much less consult, the registers from which the enumerative census slips of the British Indian reports were compiled. The search should not be given up, however.

Even access to the schedules, if they exist, would not overcome some of the hazards which come across from the fact that most enumeration was done as honorary labour by persons deputed from other public employments. One man very modestly entered himself on the schedule, writing down the fact that he was ‘illiterate’. Another entered particulars for a saint buried in an ancient tomb, pleading in excuse the common belief of the neighbourhood that the saint still lived within his shrine. A third, discovering that a census number had been painted on a village temple, enumerated the deity inside: ‘Name, Ganesha; Religion, Hindu; Sex, male; Civil condition, married; Age, about 200 years; Means of subsistence, offerings from villagers; etc.’²⁶ Such stories punctuated almost all the census reports and may have been included, perhaps as a ritual, to amuse British readers. Still, if they are not false, the stories should remind us of the potentials for variation in returns of a locality because of the quality of personnel in that particular district.

Certain other variations are also found between provinces and between decades, which may complicate or enrich research possibilities. Census reports, gazetteers, and ethnographic survey publications all tended to impinge upon one another. Particularly in respect to caste data, one should note carefully any instance of observations on a given caste being taken up from one publication into another, with or without benefit of citation. Other authorities or sources may also be incorporated, although dating from much earlier times. The Bombay census of 1872 took a lengthy extract on caste out of Arthur Steele, *Law and Custom of Hindoo Castes within the Dekhum Provinces*, which had been published in 1827 and republished without alteration in 1868.²⁷

On the other hand, some provincial census programmes added publications of more detailed returns in the form of district handbooks. Most of these are not detailed with reference to caste, although

some, such as the 1871 Madras materials, are. They do give statistics for villages and talukas and may prove very useful. However, they did not receive wide circulation at the time of publication and have not been included in the modern microfiche reproductions of the Census of India.²⁸

In this brief essay I have attempted to touch upon some of the characteristic features of Indian census materials regarding caste and religion, pointing out some of the problems which arise in utilizing these data for historical analysis. My point of view is really that of a frustrated scholar who found that his own particular investigations on the history of a caste could not be much advanced through use of official census publications. I must emphasize that many of the shortcomings arose from my having selected a numerically small caste (*jati*) and also from the fact that its members were distributed within several different census territories.²⁹

At the early stages of my research I wanted to establish the numerical strength of the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmans as well as to learn all that I could about their geographical distribution, occupational patterns, and level of education. Since this *jati*'s home territory was divided between the Bombay and Madras presidencies in North and South Kanara districts, two sets of census materials had to be consulted at the outset. Problems immediately arose. I learned from other sources that Saraswats were also perceived to be a component of a wider category of related castes known as the Gaud Saraswat Brahmans, and furthermore that they had been migrating extensively in the late nineteenth century. I searched census reports of the Central Provinces, Bengal, Baroda, Cochin, Hyderabad, Central India, and Travancore for reference to isolated migrants, but in vain. The census volumes of those areas concentrated their statistical categories on castes and communities of local standing and importance. Few reports gave details of groups numbering under 100,000 or 10,000. Thus in areas of recent and modest migration, Saraswat residents would only be incorporated in one of those vague 'others' categories. And, after 1901, as noted above, even South Kanara's figures grew vague when the Madras reports moved to tabulating Brahmans according to major language. The Konkan-speaking Saraswats got returned variously as 'Others' because Konkani was their mother-tongue, or as 'Kannada' because most of them were literate in that language.

Another difficulty arose in the provincial-centredness of census reports. I could learn how many persons of all castes and communities had migrated into Bombay city or any Bombay district from each and every other district of Bombay. However, South Kanara migrants to North Kanara or to Bombay were treated simply as part of a single Madras Presidency category. After 1901, the Bombay reports did include some selective data on caste migrations from selected districts outside the Bombay Presidency, but there was no consistency nor continuity from one decade to the next.

Only within the census reports of Bombay Presidency, but not Bombay city, during the decades 1901 to 1931, could I find usable data for analysis of educational and occupational status. This small breakthrough was complicated, however, by the fact, which I came to slowly apprehend, that it was in this very period that some Saraswats and their Gaud Saraswat cousins were promoting a caste unification movement which stressed a common caste-category name. While it became possible to measure some of the overall characteristics of persons returning themselves, in certain districts, as Gaud Saraswat Brahmans, it did not follow that the numbers included all Saraswats, since participation in the unification movement had been a point of social controversy within the caste.³⁰ Once more the census documentations left important gaps in my analysis.

Perhaps my frustration mirrored an earlier dissatisfaction among intelligent members of the Saraswat caste itself, for they made a series of efforts to carry out a caste census of their own, commencing in 1896 and culminating in a comprehensive coverage in 1932.³¹ While knowledge of this sort had been of little importance when most member of the caste were still in rustic North or South Kanara, the migration of Saraswat into new territories and urban centres created a need to preserve the community's links.

Ultimately it was possible for me only to utilize the official decennial census reports as a means toward developing hypotheses about demographic, economic, or intellectual trends among those persons who returned themselves as Saraswat Brahman in the localities where the census took note of the identity. It was a frustrating experience, but a useful initiation into coming to terms with the complexities of the census reports of British India.

My own misadventures with the Census of India ought not obscure

the fact that this massive collection of qualitative and quantitative data can be extensively and successfully exploited for historical research. It only must be stipulated that it cannot be assumed that the census will clarify questions about religion and caste simply because there are lots of tables dealing with aspects of those topics. Nor should the mere existence of those neat rows of numbers confer upon the researcher any satisfying sense of certainty either in terms of accuracy of enumeration or of representation. Within any individual decennial census, particularly within a single province, I think the chances of consistency and coherence of data are much higher, but construction of comparative time series between decades and provinces may prove a hopeless task in some instances. The fact that in my own programme of research on a single caste's history I experienced great frustration need not lead to an assumption that other single-caste studies could not be done. Certain studies based on the census figures alone could be carried out with a high level of statistical manipulation and analysis, but prudence should be exercised in assuming that the results have a higher reality because of their quantitative derivation. Imagination and caution must go hand in hand as any historian of modern India approaches the census reports in an effort to become a 'scholar who counts'.

Notes

1. Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,' unpublished paper delivered at the Second European Conference on Modern South Asia, 1970. Cf. opinions in Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton, N.J., 1951), pp. 162–3.
2. Professor Narendra Wagle of the University of Toronto is currently compiling an extensive collection of legal materials on the Maratha domination in western India wherein a number of caste-ranking disputes arise.
3. Cf. Professor Jones' essays in this volume. [The volume referred to being N. Gerald Barrier (ed.), *Census in British India: New Perspectives*.—Eds]
4. A convenient compilation of census table formats for each decennial census from 1871–2 to 1971 is produced in D. Natarajan, *Indian Census Through a Hundred Years* (Delhi, 1972), vol. 2, pp. 17–448.
5. Census of India, 1901, vol. 15, Madras, pt 1 (Madras, 1902), pp. 123–4.

6. M.S. Kamath, *The Census of India* (Madras, 1914), pp. 10–13; S.F. Desai, *A Community at the Cross-road* (Bombay, 1948).
7. Kamath, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–13.
8. Census of India, 1921, vol. 8, Bombay Presidency, pt 2 (Bombay, 1922), pp. 57–8.
9. Paul R. Brass, 'Muslim Separatism in United Provinces: Social Context and Political Strategy before Partition,' *Economic and Political Weekly Annual Number 5* (January 1970).
10. G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, 5th edition (Bombay, 1969), p. 279.
11. Quoted in Census of India, 1891, Madras, vol. 1 (Madras, 1883), p. 103.
12. Census of India, 1901, vol. 9, Bombay Presidency, pt 1 (Bombay, 1902), p. 175. Emphasis added.
13. Census of India, 1921, vol. 8, Bombay Presidency, pt 1 (Bombay, 1922), p. 178. Enthoven had by this time headed the ethnographic survey in Bombay. His *Tribes and Castes* volumes were just being published.
14. *Fourth Samyukta Garuda Sarasvata Brahmana Parisad, Vasal, 1912 Hakigat* (Bombay, 1913), p. 34.
15. Census of India, 1911, vol. 14, Punjab, pt 1 (Lahore, 1912), p. 435.
16. In South Kanara district of Madras I traced at least twelve 'caste' names which had been appearing in connection with Saraswats or Gaud Saraswats in response during the early census reports to the question 'what is your caste?' These appear to have reflected varying understandings of the specificity required by the census. Cf. Ghurye, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
17. Census of India, 1881, Madras, vol. 1 (Madras, 1883), p. 106.
18. Census of India, 1891, vol. 8, Bombay, pt 2 (Bombay, 1892).
19. Census of India, 1901, vol 15, Madras, pt 1 (Madras, 1902), p. 125.
20. E.g., Census of India, 1911, vol 10, Central Provinces and Berar, pt 2 (Allahabad, 1912), pp. 319–51; Census of India, 1911, vol. 15, United Provinces, pt 2 (Allahabad, 1912), pp. 714–53. In the same years several North Indian provinces, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Assam, United Provinces, Punjab and Central Provinces and Berar gave details of the caste of gazetted officers and payers of income tax. Census of India, 1911, vol. 1, India, pt 1 (Calcutta, 1913), pp. 429–30.
21. Government of Bombay, *Caste Table: Bombay Province (Based on 1941 Census)* (Bombay, 1942), p. 2.
22. As Professor Schwartzberg indicates in his essay in this volume [see fn. 3 above—Eds], 'caste' did snarl economic enquiries even in the 'caste-free' 1951 census because of reference to 'traditional' caste occupations in tabulating an individual's economic activity.
23. Census of India, 1881, Madras, vol. 1 (Madras, 1883), p. 102.

24. Census of India, 1901, vol. 15, Madras, Part 1 (Madras, 1902), p. 126.
25. Ibid., p. 127.
26. Ibid., p. 3.
27. Census of Bombay, 1872, vol. 2 (Bombay, 1875), pp. 110–34.
28. The most comprehensive collection of these volumes I located was in the British Museum, c.f. F.B. Campbell, ed., *Index-Catalogue of Indian Official Publications in the Library, British Museum* (London, 1900), for nineteenth-century examples.
29. Frank F. Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World: The Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins, 1700–1935* (Berkeley and New Delhi, 1977).
30. Frank F. Conlon, 'Caste by Association: The Gauda Sarasvata Brahmana Unification Movement', *Journal of Asian Studies* 33 (May, 1974), pp. 351–65.
31. H. Shankar Rau, *The Chitrapur Saraswat Directory, 1933* (Bombay, 1933).

The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia*

BERNARD S. COHN

The bulk of social and cultural anthropological fieldwork has been done in colonial settings. In a very real way the subject matter of anthropology has been the study of the colonized. A category of 'colonized people' is imprecise and difficult to specify, but it would in my terms include groups such as the American Indians and Africans transplanted to the New World, people who were physically uprooted and placed in new locations and relocated in newly created stratification systems, to the peoples of much of Africa, South and South East Asia—in which the effects of colonial rule have been more indirect and are mainly felt through political and economic innovations growing out of the colonial rulers' aim to control products of colonized labour rather than the labour itself. Anthropologists, when they have been concerned with the process of colonialism, have emphasized the political and the economic effects of alien rule and have mainly described structural changes in the affected societies. Thus far, there has been little attention paid in the study of colonialism to the culture of the colonized.

In use, the concept 'culture' in its more recent meanings, to 'denote an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols,

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a system of inherited conceptions expressed in forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life'¹—rather than older definitions of culture, which are broader and tend to emphasize the idea of culture as a 'way of life' encompassing social as well as cultural systems—is more common. In the terms I am using here, culture equals symbol systems.

Historians in general have been much more sensitive than have anthropologists to the problem of changing culture in colonial societies. Historians of India see cultural change in standard terms of intellectual history. They have been concerned, if I may use a slightly out of date term, with the 'impact' of Western thought on Indian culture. Ten years ago this was viewed as a replacement of Indian ideas, concepts, and symbols by Western ones. Students of recent India talked about Westernization, by which they meant the results of the borrowing by the Indian elite of Western ideas about 'attitudes towards life'. The 'Bengal Renaissance' can be taken as an example of the process of Westernization. The idea of a 'Renaissance' is clearly Western in origin; it draws directly on Western historical experience as well as on the Western form of historical thinking, which is linear, in which it was possible for Humanists to see the past in relation to themselves and to think of a process by which the past is redefined and purified and selected aspects of it utilized for models or prescriptions for behaviour in the present. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European scholars developed the idea of the Renaissance to denote a particular period in Western history and the development of a distinctive culture associated with that period. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries both indigenous Asian scholars and intellectuals as well as some Western historians viewed the development of intellectual stances among groups in Chinese, Indian, and Islamic societies as the same kind of experience that Western Europe went through in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There has been an attempt to broaden the concept of 'Renaissance' to cover the movement of cultural change brought about by the contact of Asian societies with the ideas and forms of thought developed in Western Europe. I would list the following as characteristic of these intellectual trends in Asian societies.

That these societies were living in 'a new era', a dawn, a rebirth of culture, is well conveyed by Amiya Charan Banerji.

Superstition and cruel customs played havoc in Hindu society. The burning of widows in those days was a common practice. The poor meekly submitted to the tyrannies of the rich. The woman suffered terribly from many unjust and oppressive customs. She was completely dominated by man. Modern science had not yet begun to dispel ignorance, superstition, and blind faith. The Hindu orthodoxy formed almost an immovable barrier on the path leading to progress and development. This was the set-up of the Hindu society specially in Bengal when Rammohan Roy appeared on the scene. His was the mighty genius who tore to pieces the arguments advanced by orthodox pundits in support of idolatrous and superstitious practice and of the cruel custom of *Satidaha*. In religion, in education, and in the political sphere he gave the start to national awakening about one hundred and fifty years ago. He was indeed the father of the Indian Renaissance. During the period of the Renaissance, a galaxy of inspired religious leaders, great social reformers, noble patriots, eminent political thinkers, and mighty literary geniuses appeared in India and especially in Bengal.²

The quotation from Banerji also highlights another major theme of cultural renaissances, certainly as typical of the Bengal case, and that is the need for purification of religious thought and practice. The Bengali intellectuals of the nineteenth century sensed that there was a quintessential Hinduism, which over the centuries had become encrusted with superstition and other unhealthy accretions.

A third theme related to the need to 'purify' Hinduism was to make it consonant with European ideas of rationality, empiricism, monotheism, and individuality. Many Bengalis by the middle of the nineteenth century saw the development of ambivalence, that they couldn't totally integrate a purified Hinduism with Western rationality. On the one hand this led to what was perceived as hypocrisy—or, as one writer put it, 'There are those who believe one way and practice in another, who celebrate the *puja* in the morning and dine of veal cutlet and sausage in the evening.'³

This ambivalence, this view of the modern Indian between East and West, becomes a central theme in the Renaissance view of its own culture and comes down to the recent past in the writings of men like Jawaharlal Nehru:

I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and approach to life

are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me, as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways; and behind me lie, somewhere in the subconscious, racial memories of a hundred, or whatever the number may be, generations of Brahmans. I cannot get rid of either that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions. They are both part of me, and, though they help me in both the East and the West, they also create in me a feeling of spiritual loneliness not only in public activities but in life itself. I am a stranger and alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feeling.⁴

This theme of ambivalence was put in even more stark and personal terms by Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, a religious reform movement, in 1879, after he had heard Ramakrishna, a 'traditional' rustic mystic and divine:

What is there common between him and me? I, a Europeanized, civilized, self-centred, semi-sceptical, so-called educated, reasoner, and he, a poor, illiterate, shrunken, unpolished, diseased, half-idolatrous friendless Hindu devotee? I, who have listened to Disraeli and Fawcett, Stanley and Max Müller, and a whole host of European scholars and divines; I, who am an ardent disciple and follower of Christ, a friend and admirer of liberal-minded missionaries and preachers, a devoted adherent and worker of the rationalistic Brahmo Samaj—why should I be spellbound to hear him?⁵

The ambivalence was tied with a discovery or rediscovery of the past. This would seem to be almost necessary in terms of the ambivalence created by a view of the culture of the present as being one that the intellectuals could not fully accept since they had incorporated an European view into their own. Following our Bengal example, if the intellectuals accepted the European-based view of their present, which emphasized the aberrations of the society and its religious system, then they would have to reject their own culture or be hypocrites. However, if they could find in their past a 'golden age' and time when their own religion and society were superior, then they could argue that Indian civilization at a point in the past was the equal of Western society and that the rebirth inherent in the idea of a Renaissance was a rebirth of their own traditions and not only a borrowing from the West. It became imperative for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indians to develop a knowledge of their own past, the form of which might be couched in Western historical terms but the intent of which

was often to provide a rationale to counter the pressure of Western cultural imperialism.⁶

In the twentieth century, with the development of nationalism, there was a concerted effort on the part of both political and cultural leaders to use historical figures, movements, and symbols derived from the historical record of India as a means of relating the struggle against the British to the Indian past. In western India the efforts of B.G. Tilak and his followers to revive the interest of Maharashtrians in Sivaji,⁷ Bankim Chandra Chatterji's use of historical themes in his novels, particularly in *Anandamath*,⁸ Savarkar's *First War of Indian Independence*,⁹ which viewed what the British historians call the Indian Mutiny of 1857–9 as the first Indian struggle for freedom against the British: all of these can be seen as part of a process by which Indians could view their own history, identify with it, and use it in the development not only of political nationalism but in order to try to define their own identity. The phenomenon, which I have been illustrating, has its counterpart in most parts of the world.¹⁰

To speak only of a Western impact or of modernization, to see the process of cultural change and the development of new cultural identities as a kind of byproduct of an historical experience whose major thrust has been political and economic, is to miss some of the significance of what has happened. Not only have the colonial peoples begun to think of themselves in different terms, not only are they changing the content of their culture, but the way that they think about their culture has changed as well. The Indian intellectuals of Bengal in the nineteenth century and then the whole Western-educated class of Indians in the twentieth century have objectified their culture. They in some sense have made it into a 'thing'; they can stand back and look at themselves, their ideas, their symbols and culture and see it as an entity. What had previously been embedded in a whole matrix of custom, ritual, religious symbol, a textually transmitted tradition, has now become something different. What had been unconscious now to some extent becomes conscious. Aspects of the tradition can be selected, polished, and reformulated for conscious ends. Gandhi saw *ahimsa* (non-violence) as quintessentially Indian and shaped it into an effective political weapon. B.G. Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose, early nationalists, selected from Hindu traditions concepts and ideals which could be worked into a new kind of national religious ideology.

They reinterpreted the Bhagavad Gita into what has become for many modern Indians an authoritative expression of Hindu thought. They argued it was the Hindu's *dharma* to further nationalism; by implication they argued, on the basis of their interpretation of the Gita, that violence was justified in a righteous cause and that nationalism was a religiously given righteous cause. Gandhi also contributed to the 'objectification' of the message of the Gita and the process by which the Gita is now looked upon as a kind of Hindu bible, as the single most authoritative expression of Hinduism.¹¹

In the current analysis of symbol systems by anthropologists, the effort is to see underlying structures, to seek coherence in the statements made by informants, to seek the relationship of cultural categories as expressed in myth and rituals, and often to put together cultural expressions which on the surface appear to be contradictory. In working with informants or in the analysis of texts of particular myths or folktales, or in records of particular rituals, the anthropologist usually does not have the materials to study directly how the particular symbols or symbol clusters or cultural categories came to be associated, how they are maintained and how they change. Explanations, when they are made in this form of analysis, may call upon explanations which are rooted in some idea of human nature or are related to particular issues of societies, or they are seen as based on psychological differences.

The historian of ideas of literate societies can trace symbols through time but frequently has difficulty in relating the changes in symbol systems directly to change in the society, or if he can he frequently is not interested in doing so and treats ideas and their symbolic expression as *sui generis*. Historians frequently talk of the 'climate of opinion', the *zeitgeist*, the 'feeling of an age' or the *weltanschauung*, but infrequently tell us how they are established, maintained, and transmitted.¹² In the study of India there are a number of obvious contexts to probe if one is interested in the process of objectification and in the process of the reformulation of Indian culture in the recent past. Educational institutions have attracted the attention of historians,¹³ also Western-style scholarship,¹⁴ the development of printing and literary societies,¹⁵ the studies of the recent history of modern Indian languages,¹⁶ and studies of the courts and the legal system have contributed to the process of objectification.¹⁷

Central to the process of objectification have been the hundreds of situations that Indians over the past two hundred years have experienced in which precedents of action, in which rights to property, their social relations, their rituals, were called into question or had to be explained. It was the act of questioning the need for explanation to themselves or to the British which lies at the heart of the process. As a means of exploring the process of objectification, as a case study of how the process developed, I will briefly describe the structure and function of the Indian census. I think the census makes a good case study of the process for several reasons. First, it touched practically everyone in India. It asked questions about major aspects of Indian life, family, religion, language, literacy, caste, occupation, marriage, even of disease and infirmities. Through the asking of questions and the compiling of information in categories which the British rulers could utilize for governing, it provided an arena for Indians to ask questions about themselves, and Indians utilized the fact that the British census commissioners tried to order tables on caste in terms of social precedence.¹⁸

The Pre-History of the Census 1780–1820

The history of the Indian census must be seen in the total context of the efforts of the British colonial government to collect systematic information about many aspects of Indian society and economy. The first problem the British faced was the development of information on the collection of revenue with the acquisition of the right to collect revenues from some of the territories in Bengal. In 1769 the British appointed fifteen revenue supervisors for the districts of Bengal and Bihar from which they had the right to collect revenue. The supervisors' task was to supervise Indian tax officials who were to do the actual work. Henry Verelst, Governor of Bengal, drew up instructions for the supervisors, which among other things stressed the necessity for the collection of information on the history of the districts, and on the history of leading families and their customs as these affected their positions in relation to landholding. The supervisors were to obtain complete rent rolls for the districts based upon direct collection of information from local zamindars and revenue officials. They were also to report on the agricultural and craft production of the districts.¹⁹

It appears that the instructions for the collection of information were never systematically carried out by the supervisors but these instructions were taken by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars as the symbolic founding of activities that eventually developed into the various Gazetteer series published in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ Coincident with the attempt to develop systematic information centred on the nature of landholding, revenue assessments, and crude information on trade and agriculture—topographic surveying, exploration, and the drawing of accurate maps began to develop rapidly.²¹

In the early decades of the nineteenth century special inquiries usually concerned with the functioning of the administration of justice or revenue were directed to be undertaken either by the Court of Directors, by the Board of Control in London, or by the Governor General in India. Typical of such an effort was the request of the Earl of Moira (Governor General of India, 1812–23) late in 1814 to district judges directed to the question of the functioning of the courts but incidentally calling for information on the population of their districts and brief descriptions of the economy and society of the districts.²² With the acquisition of new territories through annexation or military conquest, individual officers of the Company attempted to summarize pre-existing records which might yield quantitative information of a social and economic sort; they combined with this the qualitative assessments of population, land area, agricultural and craft production, and discussion of history and government, often based on reports of subordinate officials.²³

Characteristically, these kinds of materials were heavily weighted toward political history, with particular emphasis on the reigning royal houses and to questions affecting the assessment and collection of land revenue. Fortunately though, they contain either in separate sections or in passing descriptions of the main castes and tribes in the region, which are larded with normative judgements about their qualities. Estimates of population are frequently given but it is hard to find the basis on which these estimates are made. For Maratha territories, the estimates seem to have been developed out of the revenue records rather than by direct census enumeration.²⁴

The first full-scale effort to produce a Gazetteer of India was that of Walter Hamilton, *A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Description*

of Hindostan and the Adjacent Countries, 2 vols, London, 1820. Hamilton's aim was to 'reduce the Geography of Hindostan to a more systematic form than had yet been attempted . . . and at the same time to present a description of its internal economy.' Hamilton organized his Gazetteer in major territorial blocks, largely following the Mughul provinces and districts. The Gazetteer was based on what published materials there were; for geographical information his main source was Major James Rennel's *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan*, which was published in 1793, on articles which had appeared in *Asiatic Researches*, in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, and on manuscript materials found in the India Board. The usefulness of Hamilton's Gazetteer was in the location of many places relatively accurately in terms of latitude and longitude, in brief historical sketches of the principal states and towns, in mileages between locations, and in the assembling of what population estimates existed at the time.

Early Attempts at Population Estimates and the Taking of Censuses 1820–70

Walter Hamilton in his Gazetteer estimated the population of India at 123 million. Hamilton was not too clear on what this estimate was based and refers in a general way to reports of the India Board. Apparently these were partially made up of responses in 1801 submitted by collectors to the Board of Revenue for Bengal, as well as of the work of Buchanan. These cover the Presidency of Bengal and it is not clear how he arrived at figures for the rest of India.²⁵

As part of the materials submitted to the House of Commons in connection with the investigation carried on at the time of Charter renewal in 1831–2, Thomas Fisher, searcher of the Record at the East India House, provided a figure of 89 million for the population of British India. His figures were based on reports for Lower and Upper Bengal submitted in 1822 and 1826 by the superintendents of police. The method used for the Upper Provinces was based on the enumeration of villages and the multiplication of that figure by the average populations for villages.²⁶ Mountstuart Elphinstone, using these figures and then estimating the population of territories not reported on by Fisher, came up with a figure of 140 million.²⁷

In the first decades of the nineteenth century there were efforts

made to conduct censuses of various Indian cities. One of the earliest reported censuses was done of Banaras in 1801 by Zulficar Ali Khan, kotwal of the city of Banaras, done at the request of the judges of the Appeal Court. He based his estimate on the purported number of houses which he counted by type, whether stone or mud, and the number of storeys. He then arrived at an average figure for each type of dwelling and came up with the grand total of 582,000.²⁸ It is this figure on which Hamilton based his estimate of 600,000 in his Gazetteer in 1820. The figure of 600,000 and above continued to be used for the population of Banaras in the middle of the nineteenth century.²⁹

It is clear that this was a gross overestimate on the part of Zulficar Khan, who according to James Prinsep (who carried out a census of Banaras in 1827–8) used the high figure to enhance the importance of his position as kotwal. Prinsep was Mint Master in Banaras and secretary of the short-lived Committee on Local Improvements in Banaras. It was in connection with this latter job that Prinsep carried out his census. He adopted two methods. The first was to have interviewed the *chaudhuris* of all of the castes in Banaras, and when Prinsep couldn't determine such an office for a caste he undertook direct investigation. This census gave him a figure of 152,613. His second method was based on as accurate a listing of all the houses in Banaras as he considered possible, which he made up from a register being put together for the levying of a tax for the cleaning and repair of streets and drains. Prinsep then classified the houses as to size and type, got average figures for each type on a sample basis, and estimated the population of Banaras at 181,482. He added to this some people living in the suburbs and estimated the population at approximately 200,000.³⁰ Censuses done later in the nineteenth century indicate that Prinsep's figures were perhaps too high and that the lower figure of 152,000 was more nearly correct.³¹

There is reason to believe that not only was the population of Banaras consistently overestimated in the first half of the nineteenth century, but that of other cities as well. Given the methods used it is easy to see why the population may have been overestimated. The reasons why the overestimations were believed is a more interesting question. I think the reasons lie in the perceptions of the cities by Europeans. In the early nineteenth century, as in the twentieth century,

Indian towns and cities, particularly the *chauks* and bazaars, the commercial areas, give a sense of huge crowds. This sense comes from the layout of the towns and cities, and from the architecture. Town plans in the nineteenth century were featured by many narrow lanes with even narrower paths leading off them. In cities such as Banaras there were large brick and stone tenements which often seemed to the observer to be built without plan and to contain enormous numbers of people. Most European travellers described Banaras in terms of large numbers of people, crowded conditions, noise, and tumult.

The streets are only a few feet broad, confined with high buildings on each side, so that the sun can hardly penetrate to the bottom of the lanes.³²

Of the population of Benares, I am unable even to conjecture: the streets are so narrow and the buildings crowded to such a degree that you can have no conception of the number of people they contain.³³

The city of Benares is certainly the richest, as well as probably the most populous in India . . . the vast population, the crowds of beggars and pilgrims.³⁴

There are no wide streets in Benares, or large thoroughfares leading down to the river, but numerous narrow and intricate lanes.³⁵

In addition to the estimates made in the 1820s for the total population of India, the British continued in the 1830s and 1840s to try to determine the population of India. Most of the efforts were based upon the revenue surveys and were a byproduct of attempts to map villages and lands. The Court of Directors called for a more accurate count to be made in 1846 as they felt that the figure 32 million for Upper India (North West Provinces) was much too high and they couldn't believe that the population was close to 500 persons per square mile.³⁶

The district officers in the North Western Provinces were instructed to obtain population figures from revenue surveys, from statements in reports on education, from settlement reports, and from other surveys carried out in recent years. The figures for villages and *tahsils* were to be tested against information supplied by *chaukidars* and *patwaris*. The population estimate for districts was to be based on a listing of the villages and the estimate of the number of houses in each village. The village officials were to provide the house counts by each caste. Average figures for the number of persons in a house by caste were to

be computed. John Thornton, who was secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, was aware that there might be a difference in the number of persons in a house depending on the caste. He reasoned that the upper-caste houses would have more people than the lower-caste households. In addition to a gross figure for each village in a district and gross district figures, an effort was made to determine how many people were agriculturalists. An agriculturalist was to be defined as anyone who derived his subsistence in whole or in part from the land, whether in wages or in rent, even though he might have other sources of income. This may not be the start of the conceptual problems which the census of India was to have and continues to have with the question of what is an agriculturalist, what is a labourer, what is a primary and what a secondary occupation, and all the various knotty questions of occupational categories in the Indian census. But it can be seen that from the earliest attempts there were conceptual problems built into the economic categories of the census.³⁷

We can also see the beginnings of problems in developing categories adequate to cover aspects of Indian social structure. In the report of Shakespear, the instruction to the collectors regarding the question of house, household and family was:

A house or family must be defined according to its local signification; perhaps it may generally be defined as a family living together, inhabiting a distinct part of a tenement or the whole of one or more tenements, in the same enclosure.³⁸

As could be predicted with such a vague definition, collectors were left to define what a house or family was in their own terms. Two operational definitions of family seem to have been used. One was based on multiple criteria of common expenditure,³⁹ and the other was based on eating from a common hearth.⁴⁰ Those involved in this early effort at a census soon found difficulties even with questions of age, not only the difficulties of getting absolute age but also of trying to get estimates of the number of adults and the number of children. At what age was a young male considered to be a child and at what age was he to be considered an adult? This question was left to individual collectors and A.A. Roberts in the Delhi district decided as follows: 'It was ruled that males above 12 should be considered men, and under that age as boys; and females above 10 should be enumerated

as women and under that age as girls.' Notwithstanding the selection of these early ages, the tendency of the people was to consider still younger persons as men and women.⁴¹ Roberts also found problems in getting estimates of the number of females, as the Hindus consistently underestimated the number. This was a problem which Prinsep also found in Banaras when he questioned chaudhuris of the castes as to their numbers, since women were not reported.

Within five years of the publication of the census of 1847 orders were given that another census be carried out because of the inaccuracies of the previous census. This census was to be carried out by an actual enumeration of the total population of the North West Provinces and was to be carried out on the same day, 1 January 1853.⁴² This census was to record occupation as well as the number of people, households, and the number of villages. The actual enumeration was to be carried out by patwaris assisted by the village police, and in towns and cities by the heads of wards. In rural areas the work of the patwaris was to be supervised by the tahsildars, and that of the tahsildars by the collectors. There was an effort to make specific the definition of family—'Those who live together or who cook their food at the same hearth.'⁴³ The problem of what an agriculturalist was not much advanced—'Those families are to be shown as agricultural of whom the head derives the whole or any part of his subsistence from the possession or the cultivation of land.'⁴⁴

Christian, in his summary of the findings, pointed to the high density of the population, which was 420 to the square mile for the whole of the North Western Provinces, and reached over 600 persons per square mile in the eastern part of the province. He tried to disarm the critics in London—who had used such density figures as an indication of the inaccuracies of previous counts—by pointing out that this would in no way seem strange to those familiar with Indian conditions, and said that if anything there was probably an underestimation rather than an overestimation in the population figures.⁴⁵

Christian was not satisfied with the way in which agriculturalists were counted. He felt too broad a construction was given to the term 'agriculturalist'. His solution to the difficulty was to recommend that in future censuses the caste and occupation of the head of each family be recorded. He felt that a combined criteria of caste and occupation

was the only way in which the relative strength of the agricultural and non-agricultural classes could be accurately ascertained.

The confusion amongst the European observers of caste and occupation in the early nineteenth century was quite widespread and can easily be seen in the town and district censuses which the Bhattacharyas reprint in their *Report on the Population Estimates of India 1820–1830*. There was a tendency to report the numbers in a particular caste as if all members of the caste followed the culturally assumed occupation, even though it was frequently known that not all Brahmans worked as priests and not all Rajputs were warriors and landlords. Some observers, such as Walters, who did a census of Dacca in 1830, tried to give both caste membership and, when the members of the caste followed more than one occupation, to give a breakdown by household of the occupations they followed. Walters, though, clearly had difficulties in deciding what a caste was, since Sudras are listed as a caste as well as Banias.⁴⁶

The Development of the Modern Census 1871–1901

A full census of India was to have been attempted in 1861 but because of the dislocations caused by the suppression of the rebellion of 1857–9 and of the sensitivity which the British had developed to what, at least in North India, might be constructed as undue interference in the life of the people, the census was postponed until 1871–2. A census of most of the provinces and princely states was carried out in 1871 and 1872, but such imperfections, both in administration and in conception, developed that not much reliance was put in the census at the time. There seems to have been very little effort made to make the provincial censuses comparable to each other. The rules for recording the heads of households differed from province to province, certain categories of information, for example on education and literacy, were not collected in all provinces and there was much evidence of little co-operation from the population because of the fears that the carrying out of the census was for tax purposes.⁴⁷

British census officials always included in their reports accounts of rumours which were purported to circulate among the Indian population. In Oude in 1869 it was rumoured that one male from each family or every fourth man was to be taken as a recruit for the army, or as a labourer on the roads, or as an emigrant. It was also rumoured

that the women were wanted for the European soldiers. One report circulated that England had become so hot that the Queen desired that two virgins might be sent from each village to fan her day and night, and the census was merely a subterfuge for the carrying out of the Queen's orders.⁴⁸

In each of the provinces there were individual difficulties, often because of the way in which records were kept or in the staffing of the census operations. For example, for twenty years starting with the census of 1871-2, there were difficulties in Bengal in getting an accurate list of villages or, for that matter, even defining what a village was. As Bengal was permanently settled, village lists, maps, and settlement records were not available and there was not the large staff at the district and tahsil or taluk level which characterized non-permanently settled areas.

In Bengal the first step was to try to draw up an accurate list of survey *mauzas* which would provide the basic geographic unit on which the census would be carried out. It was found that the list which the police kept of villages on which the police circles (*thanas*) were based was totally inaccurate for census purposes because the boundaries of the villages were vague and the list was not up-to-date in terms of even the presence or absence of some villages. H. Beverly, who was Census Commissioner for Bengal in 1871-2, felt that the only way an accurate list of villages could be obtained was by sending a responsible official to each revenue village to check the boundaries and particulars of that village. His instructions, which were duly forwarded to the revenue commissioners throughout Bengal, brought an immediate howl of response that such a check could not be carried out without seriously interfering with their regular work. If a special staff were appointed, it was estimated that 350 officials would have to be appointed for a period of four months at a cost of 70,000 rupees to visit every village in Bengal, exclusive of Bihar.⁴⁹

In the 1881 census of Bengal, it was decided to use a list which was in the process of being prepared by the Boundary Commissioner, who was an officer of the Revenue Survey. The office had been created in 1853 to settle all boundaries of revenue and judicial units and to prepare an accurate list of *mauzas* (revenue) villages in each magistrate's jurisdiction. This work was finished in time for the 1881 census and provided the basis for drawing up village lists for the census. In 1891, what was termed the residential village was the basis for determining

census units. In Bihar it turned out that the mauza designation was widely enough known that the residential village and revenue village coincided. In Bengal proper and in Orissa this turned out not to be the case and the distinction between hamlet and village and even the boundaries of dispersed villages were not clear to the residents and to the census enumerators. This led to a situation in which, in the Cuttack district in Orissa, the census recorded 12,841 villages in 1881, 5429 in 1891, and 6347 in 1901.⁵⁰

Also related to the problem of the location of a village was the problem that arose of trying to distinguish villages from towns. In the 1872 census a town was distinguished from a village arbitrarily by defining any place with more than 5000 people in it as a town. The purpose of making distinctions, according to J.A. Bourdillon, Deputy Superintendent of Census Operations for Bengal in 1881, was to contrast the occupational structure of rural and urban people and 'to show how their separate modes of life affect their ages and civil conditions, and to display the sources from which our urban population is drawn.'⁵¹ Bourdillon didn't feel that a simple size criterion was sufficient because places smaller than 5000 people could have the social characteristics of a town, and places over 5000 people could be based entirely on agriculture and not have any characteristics of towns. The decision was to use an administrative definition of a town as those places notified under the Municipalities Act of 1876 as well as any place with more than 5000 people.

The experience which the census directors had in Bengal with the location and definition of a village and town can be repeated for almost every province in India and for almost every question asked on the census.

Perhaps the most complex question for the census takers arose over the question of caste. Questions about caste also hold the most interest today for anthropologists and many other social scientists. G.S. Ghurye, as well as succeeding students of Indian society, saw the census itself as having effects on the caste system.

The conclusion is unavoidable that the intellectual curiosity of some of the early officials is mostly responsible for the treatment of caste given in the census, which has been progressively elaborate in each successive census since 1872. The total result has been as we have seen, a livening up of the caste-spirit.⁵²

It might be said that the historical role which Indian rulers had played as the final arbiters of the ranking of castes within their jurisdiction, including the ability to promote as well as demote castes, was now transferred by the people to the new rulers; and the ranks accorded to castes in census reports became the equivalent of traditional copper-plate grants declaring the status, rank and privileges of a particular caste or castes.⁵³

Srinivas and Ghurye raise two very important questions. Why did the British officials record the caste of individuals? Was it curiosity or was it part of the design on the part of the British, as some nationalist Indians believed, 'to keep alive, if not to exacerbate, the numerous divisions already present in Indian society.'⁵⁴ The second order of questions relates to the effects of census operations on the consciousness of caste and the use of the census for validation of claims to new status within the caste system. To these two complicated and important questions a third may be added—what influence did the census operations have on theoretical views which both administrators and social scientists developed about the Indian social system? Most of the basic treatises on the Indian caste system written during the period 1880 to 1950 were written by men who had important positions either as census commissioners for all of India or for a province. Among these were A. Baines, E.A.H. Blunt, R.E. Enthoven, B.S. Guha, T.C. Hodson, J.H. Hutton, D. Ibbetson, E.J. Kitts, L.S.S. O'Malley, H.H. Risley, H.A. Rose, R.V. Russell, and E. Thurston. Of important works written on caste during this period only William Crooke, C. Bogle, G.S. Ghurye, A.M. Hocart, J.C. Nesfield, and E. Senart did not have positions important in census operations. This latter group of authors as well as many others drew heavily for illustration and analysis on the materials generated by the census of India. It would not be an exaggeration to say that down until 1950 scholars' and scientists' views on the nature, structure, and functioning of the Indian caste system were shaped mainly by the data and conceptions growing out of the census operations. The census was the necessary prerequisite both for the Imperial Gazetteer and for the Tribes and Castes series. Much of the basic scholarly apparatus, which continues to be used today for both administrative and scholarly activity, is founded on the work done on caste and related subjects as part of the census operations.

The official rationale for the taking of the census was based on

administrative necessity. Beverly argued in 1872 that without precise information 'regarding the number of the people, there was felt to be a sense of inconvenience in the administration of Bengal. Without information on this head, the basis is wanting on which to found accurate opinions on such important matters as the growth and rate of increase of the population, sufficiency of food supplies, the incidence of local and imperial taxes, the organization of adequate judicial and police arrangements, the spread of education and public health measures.'⁵⁵ It was felt by many British officials in the middle of the nineteenth century that caste and religion were the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people. If they were to be governed well, then it was natural that information should be systematically collected about caste and religion. At the same time as census operations were beginning to collect information about caste, the army was beginning to be reorganized on assumptions about the nature of 'martial races', questions were being raised about the balance between Hindus and Muslims in the public services, about whether certain castes or 'races' were monopolizing access to new educational opportunities, and a political theory was beginning to emerge about the conspiracy which certain castes were organizing to supplant British rule. The impetus to collect information on caste went way beyond the 'intellectual curiosity' of a few officials and was based in widespread and deeply-held beliefs about Indians by the British. Ideas about caste—its origins and functions—played much the same role in shaping policy in the latter half of the nineteenth century that ideas about the village community and the nature of property played in the first half of the nineteenth century. Attempts were made in the first census of 1871–2 to collect information on caste. The principle of organization was to try to place castes (*jatis*) in the four *varnas* or in categories of Outcastes and Aborigines. The writers of the individual provincial census reports tried to classify the castes in blocks. This effort failed owing to what Waterfield called intrinsic difficulties and the absence of a uniform system of classification.⁵⁶ From the beginning of the census operations it was widely assumed that an all-India system of classification of castes could be developed.

In the development of a classification system for castes, there were two interlocked but operationally separable problems: the actual question which an enumerator asked an individual; then how this

answer was interpreted by a clerk, and eventually by a supervisor of the census of a district or of a larger unit. The actual taking of the census was a two-step affair. Enumerators were appointed by circle supervisors, who were usually government officials. Supervisors were patwaris, zamindars, schoolteachers, or anyone who was literate. They were given a form with columns on which was to be entered information about every member of a household. The information to be collected was name, religion (e.g. Hindu, Muslim), sect, caste, subdivision of caste, sex, age, marital status, language, birthplace, means of subsistence, education, language in which literate, and infirmities. There was a one-month period before the actual date of the census in which the enumerator was to fill in the forms, and then on the day of the census he was to check the information with the head of the household.

As an aid to achieving standardization in the recording of information on caste and subcaste, lists were prepared as early as the 1881 census which gave standard names with variations for the castes. The supervisors were supposed to instruct the enumerators in how to classify responses.⁵⁷ The lists of castes were alphabetically arranged giving information on where they were to be found and containing very brief notes. For example, 'Shudra, found in Eastern Bengal, descended from maid servants by their masters of good caste; also called Golam or Golam Kayastha. The term Shudra is also used to indicate the various castes supposed to represent the fourth caste of Manu. In this sense the term is to be avoided in the census schedules'; or another example, 'Sutihar, Bihar, a low-caste who spin cotton thread. In some cases the term indicates the occupation only. Its use in this sense should be avoided.' A list of terms which should not be used was also provided. These were terms like Baniya, a generic term for trading castes; Bhojpura, when used to refer to all 'up-country men'; Naik, which was a title; or Chakar, which was the name of a sub-caste. The list was headed—'List of vague and indefinite entries found in the census returns of 1891 that should be carefully excluded from colom [*sic*] 8 (caste) of the census schedules, except in the special cases where the term is said to indicate a *true caste*. Any difficulties that may arise should be reported from orders to the District Magistrate.'⁵⁸ The lists and instructions did not solve the problem of difficulties in the standardization of terminology for the enumerators, and, although in

Bengal the number of people who were not classifiable in terms of their 'true' caste dropped from over 2,300,000 in 1891, there continued to be considerable correspondence about the names by which people were recorded.

The second order of problems came in the aggregation and presentation of the data on caste. In the 1881 census, the Commissioner for India, W.C. Plowden, decided that the caste tables as found in the reports should contain information on castes and tribes which contained more than 100,000 persons. The castes should be arranged in five categories: Brahmans, Rajputs, Castes of Good Social Position, Inferior Castes and Non-Hindus or Aboriginal Castes. Plowden foresaw difficulty in separating 'castes of good social position' and 'inferior castes' and the criterion to be used was that castes engaged in personal service such as Mehters, Kahars, and Dhobis would be in an 'inferior caste' class. He believed it would be possible to determine other castes, 'which the popular voice designates as inferior'.⁵⁹ It was left to the Provincial Census Commissioner to assign the class to which the caste belonged.

J.A. Bourdillon, Census Commissioner for Bengal, felt that the classification proposed by Plowden would do great violence to the facts of the caste system as found in Bengal. The Hinduized tribes, he felt should have separate classification. He also felt that some groups, such as the Kayasthas, Khandaits, and the Babhans, were immeasurably higher in social status than the Koiris and Kumhars with whom they were classified and were very close in status to Brahmans and Rajputs. Therefore, he proposed a category of intermediary castes to come right below the Rajputs and Brahmans. The Lieutenant-Governor consulted Rajendra Lal Mitra, the outstanding Indian Sanskrit scholar of the time. Mitra set out an order of precedence, which included placing the Babhans (Bhumihars) in the same category as the Brahmans and ranking Kayasthas right below Rajputs. The Lieutenant-Governor ordered that any doubt about a caste's social position should be resolved by reference to Rajendra Lal Mitra's list.⁶⁰ Mitra based his scheme on what he termed 'Hindu ideas' of classification. He felt it was not the responsibility of the census to deal with claims for higher social positions such as were put forward by the Vaidyas of Burdwan, the Subarnabaniks, and the Kayasthas. 'Its [the census] duty is clearly to follow the textbooks of the Hindus and not to decide on particular claims.'⁶¹

The next stage in the effort to determine caste precedence in the census grew out of the efforts under H.H. Risley's direction to conduct an ethnographic survey of Bengal. Risley drew up lists of castes ordered on the basis of 'social precedence' and then sent them out to a large number of Indians for the 'expression of your opinion on the correctness of the arrangement, considered with reference to your own district, or to any part of the country of which you have special experience.'⁶² Among the recipients of the list were Sheonarain Lal Ray, Deputy Magistrate and Collector of Patna; Roy Kumar Sen, Lecturer at Dacca College; Tara Prasad Chatterjee, Deputy Magistrate of Burdwan; Asvini Kumar Basu, Additional Munsiff, Serampore; Dina Nath Dhar, Government Pleader at Dacca, as well as a number of Indians not in government employ. The correspondents were instructed to 'correct' the printed list by assigning different numbers to the castes named.

Most of Risley's correspondents were not content just to place numbers, but some consulted widely other Indians and wrote furious and often very learned notes to justify their assignments of rank. Some also heaped abuse on Risley's unnamed informants. 'It is against all notions of caste known in Hindu society to say that a Kshatriya or Vaishya is inferior in social rank to a Kayastha.'⁶³ In support of his position, Sen submitted a list drawn up by a professor of Sanskrit at Dacca in which Kayasthas were ranked below Mahisyas, a farming and fishing caste of Bengal. Another correspondent, a Brahman, didn't understand why Kayasthas wanted to be ranked as Kshatriyas and why they wanted to 'obtain honours which heralds and Ghataks (genealogists) can bestow'. He points out that the Kayasthas had done well enough with occupational opportunities with which the British government had provided them and could outstrip Brahmans in this competitive field.

Most of Risley's correspondents cited sacred texts and legends to support their positions, the code of Manu and the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* being most frequently cited. Kayastha respondents tended to cite the Ballal Sen story, a legendary account of the history of Bengal which places Kayasthas right below Brahmans. Others cited legal documents and English language legal textbooks such as *The Digest of Hindu Law* by Babu Syama Charan Sarkar, or a document filed in the criminal court of Tipperah district in 1823-4—a list of inter-marriages amongst castes which led to the founding of the present

castes of Bengal, signed by 100 pandits. However, the most frequent validation for altering Risley's list was reference to learned pandits and Sanskrit scholars. In the publication which grew out of Risley's inquiries, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 4 vols, Calcutta, 1891, he sidestepped the social precedence question by listing the castes and tribes alphabetically.

Risley himself had a theoretical axe to grind in this and in his later publications, which was that 'race sentiment' was the basis of the caste system. On the first page of *Castes and Tribes of Bengal*, Risley described a stone panel from Sanchi, which depicts three 'aboriginal women' and a troop of monkeys praying at a small shrine. 'In the background, four stately figures—two men and two women—of tall stature and regular features . . . look with folded hands and apparent approval at this remarkable act of worship.'⁶⁴ Risley's interpretation of this scene is that it shows a higher race keenly conscious of differences but on friendly terms with a lower race. The book attempts to show, says Risley, that race sentiment, far from being 'a figment of the intolerant pride of the Brahman, rests upon a foundation of fact which scientific methods confirm, that it has shaped the intricate grouping of the caste system, and has preserved the Aryan type in comparative purity throughout Northern India.'⁶⁵ In the 1901 census, which was done under Risley's direction, the question of caste precedence and of race came together and Risley felt that through anthropometric measurement he had confirmed his hypothesis that social precedence was based on a scale of racial purity.

The Rabbit Out of the Hat

This essay began with a discussion of a general cultural process—objectification—and has wound its way through some fragments of data and speculation regarding the census of India, and particularly the questions connected with the accumulation and presentation of data on caste. The implied argument is that the census was one of the situations in which Indians were confronted with the question of who they were and what their social and cultural systems were. I don't think that the act of a census enumerator asking a question of a peasant contributed too much to the process. I suspect in many

instances that the questions weren't even asked and that many of the enumerators filled in the forms on the basis of their own knowledge of their neighbours—particularly on questions of caste, language, and religion. If there was a direct effect of the census on the mass of the Indian population, it was on the enumerators. To carry out the census in the late nineteenth century at least half a million Indians had to be involved in the process, and it was probably many more than that. The keys to the situation were the instructions given by the supervisors to their circle supervisors and by the circle supervisors to the enumerators. The Indians who mainly on a voluntary basis made the census possible were a highly significant group as they were literate and educated, even if only at a primary school level.

In the towns and cities there was interest in the information which the census generated. The formation of caste *sabhas* and their petitions to have their caste status changed indicates this. Recently Thomas Kessinger found a file in a District Record Office in Jullundur district in Punjab, which is a petition from a group called Mahtons who wanted to be recorded in the census of 1911 as Rajputs. They based their claim on history and to the fact that they followed Rajput customs. Their claim was rejected at the district level as being too vague. The decision was written by the District Census Officer, Din Mohammad, who based his decision on the work of Ibbetson in the census of the Punjab in 1881 and on the work of the Settlement Officer. Din Mohammad argued though that the Mahtons had separated themselves from a tribe of hunters and scavengers called Mahatmas and had become agriculturalists. This separation would be symbolized by calling the agricultural section of the tribe Mahton Rajput. Din Mohammad appears to have accepted the claim of the Mahtons that they were recognized as Rajputs by the Rajput Pratnik Sabha of the Punjab and Kashmir, but since they didn't intermarry with the Rajputs they would have to be content with being recorded as Mahton Rajput.

The decision had immediate consequences. Apparently some of the Mahtons wanted to be able to join a Sikh regiment of the army and hence the recruiting officer for the regiment made an inquiry. Also, the Inspector of Schools of Jullundur district wanted to know how to rule on a request that the Mahtons be eligible for a zamindari

scholarship established by the Punjab government for Sikh and Hindu Rajputs.⁶⁶ What is significant in this case is the awareness which a rural and obscure group had of the desirability of being recorded as Rajputs, not only from considerations of assumed social standing but from the direct benefits such a denomination would bring them.

In 1895 Fazl-i-Rabb, who was the dewan to the nawab of Murshidabad in Bengal, wrote a book on the origin of the Muslims of Bengal. It appeared both in English and in Bengali.⁶⁷ In this study Rabb takes W.W. Hunter, the compiler of the *Statistical Account of Bengal*, and H. Beverly, Census Commissioner of Bengal for the 1871–2 census, to task for assuming all the Muslims of Bengal were of low caste origin and converted from the Hindu population. In particular, Beverly became his target. ‘We cannot say whether Mr Beverly has any ulterior object in exposing the Musalmans to contempt and ridicule by publishing such unjust opinions and lamentable conjecture and imaginative suspicion as he has done.’⁶⁸ Rabb felt that because the Musalmans were being unjustly held up to ridicule before the whole world, the British government should ‘repair the wrongs done to us Musalman subjects through the public writings of Mr Beverly and [we] solicit that the question at issue; viz., that of our origin and ancestor, be thoroughly enquired into with the help afforded by history and [that] the results of such investigation may be placed on record.’⁶⁹

In 1931 the consciousness of the significance of the census operation had reached a point where Indians were not merely content to petition and to write books: some groups set out to influence the answers which people would give in the census. In Lahore, just before the preliminary enumeration a handbill was widely distributed by the census committee of the Arya Samaj in Lahore.

Remember!

Census Operations Have Begun

<i>Question</i>	<i>You should answer!</i>
Religion	Vedi Dharm
Sect	Arya Samajist
Caste	Nil
Race	Aryan
Language	Arya Bhasha ⁷⁰

Concern with counting the characteristics of the Indian population, which may have started as the intellectual concerns of a few British officials or the administrative necessity of knowing the 'natives', had become an object to be used in the political, cultural, and religious battles at the heart of Punjabi politics which have been crucial down to the present. The movement of objectification had moved by the 1930s from a small group of intellectuals in Calcutta searching for cultural tools with which to counter Western influences to the towns and villages of much of India. In this process of classifying and making objective to the Indians themselves their culture and society, the census played a key role.

Notes

1. Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 1966), p. 3.
2. Amiya Charan Banerji, 'Brahmananda Keshub Chandra Sen', in Atulchandra Gupta, ed., *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta, 1958), pp. 79–80.
3. Kishori Chand Mitter as quoted in Lokanath Ghose, *The Modern History of Chiefs, Rajas, Zamindars of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1881), pt 1, p. 112.
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5. As quoted in L.S.S. O'Malley, 'General Survey', in L.S.S. O'Malley, ed., *Modern India and the West* (New York, 1941), p. 788.
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Myths, Symbols, and Community

Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh*

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This paper¹ focuses on the symbolic forms and cultural logic of the myths and rituals of Satnampanth of Chhattisgarh.² I introduce the region and the low-caste endeavour, and discuss the sources for and the reconstruction of the mythic tradition of Satnampanth.³ This sets the stage for the second step. I take up six themes within this mythic tradition to focus on the ordering of historical consciousness within myth, and thus elucidate the symbolic construction of Satnampanth. The constitution of Satnampanth as a community, an oppositional symbolic order, drew upon hegemonic and popular traditions. It was orchestrated by two major mythic figures, Ghasidas and Balakdas (father and son), who acted in complementary ways to establish Satnampanth. The new symbolic order was marked by an interrogation and critique of the relationships of power within the region. The resistance, which was conducted in a religious idiom, engaged with as well as subverted—but was also contained by—hegemonic limits. I address these questions, which involve categories of domination and subordination, religion and resistance, and hegemony and community, in a narrative which is a dialogue and play between concept and evidence.

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Chhattisgarh and Satnampanth

Chhattisgarh is a large region bounded through linguistic ties—the vernacular Chhattisgarhi is a dialect of the language group called Eastern Hindi—in south-eastern Madhya Pradesh. This geographically and politically isolated region was held by a succession of different dynasties till about AD 1000, and by the Kalachuris for the next seven and a half centuries. At the same time, the internal political order of Chhattisgarh was characterized by a hierarchical political structure based on clans which controlled their own small kingdoms, and by an acceptance of the structural features of local institutions.⁴ In the middle of the eighteenth century Chhattisgarh came to be ruled by the Marathas. Maratha rule in Chhattisgarh was carried on between 1758 and 1787 by Bimbaji, the youngest son of the Bhonsla king Raghoji I of Nagpur, and after that by *subahdars* who governed in the name of the Bhonsla king. The Marathas introduced a more centralized rule (particularly in revenue administration) and inducted Maharashtrian Brahmins and Marathas in key administrative positions; the subahdars paid a specific sum to the raja at Nagpur which was collected with the help of military force from village headmen.⁵ In 1818, after the Maratha defeat in the battle of Sitabaldi, the Bhonslas became a subsidiary ally of the colonial power. In the period between 1818 and 1830, when the Bhonsla king was a minor, the administration of Chhattisgarh was carried on by British superintendents. Major vans Agnew, the most enterprising of the superintendents, introduced a number of significant measures during his tenure (1818–25).⁶ In June 1830 Raghoji III came of age. The administration reverted to the Bhonsla king. Chhattisgarh was once again governed by subahdars; the Marathas did not undo the changes introduced by British administrators. Raghoji III died without an heir. In March 1854 the kingdom of Nagpur became a part of the dominion of the East India Company under the doctrine of lapse. The colonial regime built up a comprehensive structure of administration; the British system of law and order, constituted by civil and criminal judicial administration and by the police, worked in tandem with a revenue administration which was marked by well-defined property relations under the Malguzari Settlement.

Satnampanth was initiated in the first half of the nineteenth century among the Chamars, an untouchable group, of Chhattisgarh. Ghasidas

was born into a family of sharecroppers and farm servants (Saonjias) in the late eighteenth century in Girod in the north-eastern part of Raipur district. The Chamars constituted a significant proportion—about twenty per cent—of the population of Chhattisgarh; they either owned land or were Saonjias who received one-fourth of the produce as their share.⁷ The Chamars, on joining Satnampanth, became Satnamis. The Satnamis had to abstain from meat, liquor, tobacco, certain vegetables—tomatoes, chillies, aubergines—and red pulses. They were prohibited from using cows, as opposed to bullocks, in any of their agricultural operations, and from ploughing after the mid-day meal. Satnampanth rejected the deities and idols of the Hindu pantheon and had no temples. Members were asked to believe only in Satnam and were expected to repeat the name, morning and evening, facing the sun. There were to be no distinctions of caste within Satnampanth. Ghasidas began a *guru parampara* (tradition) which was hereditary. Satnampanth developed a stock of myths, rituals, beliefs, and practices which were associated with the gurus and constituted the Satnami mythic tradition. We get reliable estimates and a picture of the Satnami population, its distribution, and the Satnami location within the social structure from the second half of the nineteenth century. The first census was undertaken on the night of 5 November 1866. The Chamars constituted about 20 per cent—362,032 of 2,103,165—of the total population of Chhattisgarh. The census added: the ‘Chamars of these provinces are almost confined to the country of Chhattisgarh. They in no way resemble the Chamars who are leather workers and drudges of northern India. Here the Chamars have thrown off Brahmanical influence, have set up a new creed, possess a high priest and priesthood of their own.’ The statement indicates the confusion between Satnamis and Chamars which was commented on by colonial administrators, but which persisted into the twentieth century. A large proportion of the Satnamis lived in a corridor running from the area between Raipur and Durg towns, north and eastward on each side of the Seonath river, to the eastern borders of Raipur and Bilaspur districts. The period between the late nineteenth century and mid twentieth century revealed few variations in the concentration and the percentage to the total of the Satnami population in Chhattisgarh. The Satnamis were primarily tenants, agricultural labourers, and a few Malguzars. Most reports described them as peasants dependent on the

produce of their land which they cultivated themselves. In Bilaspur the group constituted roughly 28 per cent, in Durg 25 per cent, and in Raipur 28 per cent of the total tenant population of these areas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸

How do we explain the making of Satnampanth? The first difficulty in answering the question is the absence of firm and accurate chronology. British administrators, writing in the middle and late 1860s, dated the 'formulation of the Satnami creed' to the decade between 1820 and 1830.⁹ The administrators were, however, relying upon the oral testimony of their informants which cannot be counted on for accuracy. We also need to entertain the possibility that what we have here is an instance of the making of a colonial myth: it was only after the inception of British rule in 1818 that a low-caste monotheistic sect, which opposed the caste system, could come into existence. The other source on Satnampanth, the *Vanshawali* (genealogy) of the Gurus, is rooted in mythic categories; it would be a mistake and an imposition to arbitrarily extract 'historical' elements from myth.¹⁰ We cannot be certain about the specific year or decade of the beginning of Satnampanth. At the same time, the making of Satnampanth was a process that happened over several decades: we need to locate it over the first half of the nineteenth century. At this point we run into a second difficulty. Early-nineteenth-century sources on Chhattisgarh tell us very little about the nature of social relationships, continuities, changes, and ruptures in the texture of village life and the cultural order which attended the formation and development of Satnampanth.¹¹ The most detailed evidence for this period refers to the political institutions and administrative and revenue practices in the region.¹² I shall provide a brief account, based on these sources, of the background and the context to the formation of Satnampanth.¹³

The last two decades of Bhonsla rule were characterized by political uncertainty. Maharashtrian Brahmins and Marathas replaced traditional authority at different levels of the administrative structure. The sociopolitical order was disrupted. There was an increasing extortion of land revenue. As a result, the lower castes were, on the one hand, discriminated against by the specific caste character of Bhonsla administration and, on the other, pushed to the margins of village society because of the institution of *lakhabata*.¹⁴ Raids by Pindaris shook the entire edifice. The period following the beginnings of British

rule in 1818 were attended by displacements in the centre of authority: the change from the Bhonsla raja to the Angrez Sarkar (British rule) was underscored by the new administrative measures of British superintendents; in 1830 the province reverted back to Maratha rule and the subahdar occupied centre stage.¹⁵ The administrative measures of Agnew (1820–5) abolished the hereditary office of the *patel* and increased the powers of the *gaontia* (village headman) and the village *panchayat*. There was a shift in the locus of power from the patel to the gaontia and the panchayat at the level of the village;¹⁶ relationships structured by caste and its constituent principles, a critical element in the dynamics of village life, assumed importance. Finally, the period witnessed two simultaneous processes in the field of revenue administration and practices. The British modified the Maratha revenue system through an abolition of supplementary revenue demands and the unauthorized perquisites of officials, the fixation of times for payment of revenue instalments, and the grant of receipts for payments to officials, which tended to suit well off *raiyats*. At the same time, there were no radical changes effected in the method of assessment and in revenue practices, particularly in the institution of *lakhabata*: this worked against the poor and cattleless agriculturists—these included a high proportion of Chamars. Such processes of continuity and change—dislocations within the socio-political order and rapid displacements in the centre of authority; the discriminatory character of Bhonsla administration towards low castes and the increased salience of relationships structured by caste within village life; the marginalization of subordinate groups because of high levels of extortion of revenue and the institution of *lakhabata*—provided the context to the formation of Satnampanth. Satnampanth was a new symbolic power centre which resisted the caste system by drawing upon its constituent principles, and registered protest against Chamars being pushed to the margins of village society.

There are, however, limits to this exercise. It is one thing to present a sketch of the social relations and the political and administrative configuration within the region and assert that they contributed the 'objective' circumstances, the 'context', which defined the formation of Satnampanth; a necessary exercise, it is nonetheless a truism. It is quite another matter to reconstruct the principles of the socio-cultural order and the determinate relationships which provided the

conditions for the establishment of Satnampanth. The sources do not allow us to construct such a picture. Equally, we do not have the material to attempt a chronological account of the development of Satnampanth. Does this recognition of limits and of an absence close off the possibilities of making sense of Satnampanth? I answer the rhetorical question by turning to a different, alternative, account of Satnampanth.

The Reconstruction of a Mythic Tradition

This paper lies at an intersection of two mutually reinforcing sets of historiographical and theoretical influences: the field of possibility defined by people's history, particularly the *Subaltern Studies* endeavour, and my interest in caste and religion, situated in a dialogue between history and anthropology. It was this matrix which defined the need to shift from a focus on moments of overt rebellion and physical revolt of subordinate groups to the question of the meaning and nuances of subaltern resistance. I was specifically interested in the manner in which a subordinate group resisted and questioned authority in the idiom of religion. What was at stake was a recognition of the intermeshing of domination, subordination, and resistance in subaltern lives and of exploring the critical place of religion and caste in structuring the beliefs and practices of subordinate groups.

My point of entry was a social history of Satnamis and Satnampanth. Recent studies of low-caste movements have focused on religion as a mode of coping with and transforming an oppressive social order; the articulation of these initiatives was linked to popular tradition and popular culture.¹⁷ At the same time, these exercises centre on the leadership and organization of low-caste movements—the Ad Dharm in Punjab and the Satyashodhak Samaj in western India—which have left behind a set of well-defined written sources. Other studies of the dynamics of low-caste groups are a part of the anthropological tradition: they are based on detailed ethnographic accounts, rooted in the present, which were constructed through fieldwork.¹⁸ I faced a problem: the Satnami Gurus and organizational structure did not possess written sources; after my initial visit to Chhattisgarh, I was struck by the limits more than the possibilities of reconstructing the history of Satnampanth primarily through fieldwork and the methods

of oral history. The difficulties, in fact, underscored the need for alternative sources and non-official histories. I chanced upon a curious text, a written intervention within an oral tradition, called *Guru Ghasidas Ki Vanshavalī* (The Genealogy of Guru Ghasidas).¹⁹

The text was the outcome of an interesting historical encounter. In the early 1920s a set of influential members of Satnampanth had got together with local Hindu reformers and Congress leaders in Chhattisgarh to set up an organization called the Satnami Mahasabha. The Satnami Mahasabha was an effort to negotiate the network of elite organizational and constitutional politics within the region and in the Central Provinces, and to reform the Satnamis.²⁰ In the winter of 1925 Naidass and Anjordass, the major leaders of the Satnami Mahasabha, travelled with a small group of Satnamis to the Kanpur session of the Indian National Congress. In the course of the Kanpur Congress the Satnami contingent and its leaders met Baba Ramchandra. Shridhar Balwant Jodhpurkar, alias Baba Ramchandra, a Maharashtrian Brahmin, had left home at an early age, wandered through central and western India, worked variously as a coolie, a vendor, a labourer, and in 1905 had gone to Fiji as an indentured labourer and lived there for several years. After his return from Fiji Baba Ramchandra had involved himself in organizing and leading a militant and radical Kisan Sabha movement between 1918 and 1920 in the Awadh countryside.²¹ In 1925 Baba Ramchandra was disenchanted with a 'capitalist congress'.²² The Satnamis fired his imagination. The private papers of Baba Ramchandra reveal that he travelled back to Chhattisgarh with the Satnamis, stayed there till the late 1920s, and was closely involved in the activities and in specifying the trajectory of the Satnami Mahasabha. The writing of the *Vanshavalī* was one of the several consequences of the encounter between Baba Ramchandra and the Satnamis.²³

The Satnamis have a repertoire of myths, most of them about the Gurus, which are also statements about Satnampanth. It was these myths which were taken down by Baba Ramchandra under the title *Guru Ghasidas ki Vanshavalī*. The *Vanshavalī* is a curious handwritten manuscript: the script is Devnagari in a running hand; the language draws upon Hindi, Chhattisgarhi, and Marathi; the text, unlike Ramchandra's other writings among the Satnamis, bears the impress of his rapid noting of myths as they were narrated by his informants.

We know nothing about the year when the *Vanshavalī* was written by Baba Ramchandra; it could have been any time in the second half of the 1920s. Moreover, we cannot be certain of the possible use for which it was intended. What we do know is that Baba Ramchandra wrote down Satnami myths which were a part of the oral tradition.

The myths were accompanied by a stock of rituals and practices within Satnampanth. The rituals and practices were recorded by colonial administrators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their effort was, in fact, a part of the drive of the colonial state to set up effective rule and gain access to its subjects: the specification of well-defined property relations; the 'policing' and surveillance of people through law-enforcement agencies; a concern with collecting reliable estimates of population, and documenting the customs of people. The writings of the administrators on the Satnamis have something of a 'family air'; they refer to and cite each other as a part of a common endeavour to document and order the customs, rituals, and practices of a strange, indeed aberrant, people of Chhattisgarh.²⁴ I draw upon the arguments of historians and anthropologists, situated within different traditions, to fashion a reading which aligns the myths in the *Vanshavalī* with the rituals and practices recorded by administrators.

We have been warned against a mode of reading which invokes the 'will to truth' to suppress the equally present 'will to power' in a text.²⁵ The question of the relations of power within which the *Vanshavalī* and the writings of administrators were constructed needs to be posed. In the *Vanshavalī* an alive, continuously performed oral tradition was given the fixity of the written form. Moreover, the *Vanshavalī* was compiled in the context of Satnami Mahasabha activities; an initiative which sought to appropriate Satnami beliefs to a version of dominant Hinduism. We need to be wary of the imprint of a reordered and reworked Hindu 'tradition' which Ramchandra and his informants could have left on the *Vanshavalī*. The writings of the administrators were ordered by a determinate cultural scheme: a religion had to be situated within a history which was linear and chronological; the essence of a religion lay in its basic tenets; the essence—the 'truth'—had to be separated from the inevitable accretion of superstition; the basic tenets of the Satnami faith—a monotheistic sect opposed to the caste system and idolatry—could, by an ethnocentric act of will, be found

to resemble Christianity. The writings, shaped in the crucible of this cultural order of things, were marked by selectiveness, an obsessive concern with chronology and an insidious, because silent, practice of appropriation. The *Vanshavalī* does not provide us, of necessity, with direct testimony of the Satnamis; in the administrators' writings the distortions are the offspring of a culturally legitimated and sanctioned desire for 'truth'.

I would like to suggest, however, that the two sets of sources can be read to reconstruct the play of symbolic forms and the cultural logic of Satnampanth. The construction of the *Vanshavalī* suggests that the myths were hurriedly written as they were narrated: the attempt to form complete sentences is given up very soon; the *Vanshavalī* conveys a sense of Ramchandra groping for words and drawing upon his knowledge of Hindi, Marathi, and Chhattisgarhi. In an effort to capture the basic pattern of the myths sentences break off, and there is a jump to what follows in a story. Baba Ramchandra's attempt was to retain the continuity of the narrative. A text made possible by literacy can still be rooted within an oral tradition and mythical categories: the devices of a literate tradition are a 'veneer'; the real meaning of the work emerges from its mythical form.²⁶ In the *Vanshavalī* the imprint of Hindu tradition exists, in an important sense, in the use of particular words and forms of expression. Baba Ramchandra did not have the time to work upon and transform the myths. The text, as we shall see, carries the immediacy of face-to-face interaction characteristic of an oral tradition. Moreover, the *Satnam Sagar*, Baba Ramchandra's effort to give the Satnamis an 'official' history, was organized along separate lines and followed a different trajectory from the *Vanshavalī*: the tract opens with an elaborate cosmological account of the origins of the universe; various Hindu gods and goddesses occupy a significant position; the Satnami Gurus put in an appearance but are appropriated for and situated on the axis of a modified and reworked Hindu tradition.²⁷ Finally, I established during my fieldwork that the myths recorded by Baba Ramchandra continue to be a part of an ongoing Satnami oral tradition.²⁸ In the *Vanshavalī* the basic structure and relations, the internal organization of the Satnami mythic order, was not compromised by the written form. And what of the writings of administrators and ethnographers? The symbolic forms of Satnami beliefs and practices lie in the descriptions—submerged

within the interstices—of this highly ordered corpus of knowledge. The symbolic forms can be reclaimed from an ethnocentric mode of appropriation to an exercise which seeks to recover the logic of Satnampanth. I shall read the two sets of sources to understand the mythic tradition of Satnampanth.²⁹

The mythic tradition was made up of myths and beliefs, rituals and practices. The elements within this mythic tradition had developed within a determinate context over a period of time: a creative cultural process which involved accretions and deletions and, within limits, improvisation. The myths in the *Vanshavalī* had been created over a hundred years. The writings of administrators—themselves separated from each other in time—had relied on informants and drawn upon an oral tradition. They were based on stories which had grown over time. This makes for imprecision in terms of chronology. We have, in fact, noted the inadequacy of sources to provide a chronological account of the development of Satnami myths and rituals and to reconstruct the principles of the socio-cultural order and the set of relationships which provided the conditions for the genesis of Satnampanth. At the same time, the limits remind us of possibilities: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise "the way it really was" . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'³⁰ What I do is to seize hold of glimpses of this mythic tradition, at points of intersection, embedded within relationships of power—in other words, fragments of 'a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'—and piece them together.

The exercise serves to violate the 'official conceptions' of Satnampanth: the voice of the administrator, the upper-caste superordinate, the historian.³¹ First, instead of setting up an opposition between 'history' and 'myth' I treat myth as a form of ordering of historical consciousness: the mythic tradition suggests the way in which Satnamis made sense of Satnampanth. Second, I focus on the internal order and structure of the mythic tradition: Satnampanth was constituted in symbolic ways; the specific symbols within its myths and rituals, drawn from hegemonic and popular traditions, were implicated in the definition of the boundary of Satnampanth.³² Finally, Ghasidas and Balakdas, the major mythic figures of Satnampanth, played a critical role: the Gurus effected resolutions and negotiated figures of authority who populated the cosmic and social order to define the

boundary and orchestrate the construction of Satnampanth. The three movements served to interrogate relationships of power—constituted by the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, a construct of kingship and dominant caste with cultural and ritual significance, and colonial power—within Chhattisgarh. The arguments are worked through and underscore the telling of a tale which begins with the initiation of Ghasidas and ends with the death of Balakdas.

Miracles, Trials, Ordeals, and the Initiation of Ghasidas

The *Vanshavalī* opens with Ghasidas' encounter with his landed master: a critical step in the constitution of the mythic status of the guru. Ghasidas made his *tapsthan* (place of worship) in Girodpuri. After performing *tap* (worship), he took up the work of ploughing in the field of a Marar (a caste which, traditionally, grows vegetables). Ghasidas picked up the *nagar* (plough) on his shoulder; his master started walking behind him. The master saw that the plough was suspended in the air above Ghasidas' shoulder. When they reached the field the master joined the plough to the bullocks. Once again he saw that Ghasidas' hand was above the handle of the plough which was moving on its own. Until the revenue settlement operations, carried out by the colonial regime in the 1860s, the plough was the basis of assessment of land revenue in Chhattisgarh. A *nagar* or a plough of land was an elastic measure intended to represent the area which one plough and four oxen could cultivate: the plough was the basis both for the apportioning of land and the revenue demand of the state within the village.³³ In a land-surplus situation, within a social order in which the plough was charged with ritual significance, the *nagar* was a critical metaphor of power within the work process and in everyday village life. The plough was, in a manner at once substantive and symbolic, constitutive of the relationship between a ploughman and his master. Ghasidas works for his Marar master; he does not carry the burden of his master's plough on his shoulder and his hand remains above the *mooth* (handle) of the plough. Ghasidas had effected a move to transform his relationship, mediated by the *nagar*, with his agricultural master.

The response of the master was, characteristically, one of uncertainty. He thought Ghasidas was a trickster. Ghasidas pacified

him and pledged that he would continue to work for the master. The Marar master's uncertainty about Ghasidas was to end soon; it had to await Ghasidas' meeting with Satnampurush:

Ghasidas ploughed the field and left the bullocks to graze. The field was next to a mountain and the bullocks went there. When Ghasidas went there to bring back the bullocks Satnam emerged, having assumed a *chaitanya swarup*.³⁴ It was there that Ghasidas met *shwet purush* Satnam.³⁵ Satnampurush said to Ghasidas, 'I had sent you to reform the *vansh* (lineage), but you forgot and have started working for others. This entire Chamar vansh has got spoilt. Have you forgotten this? Intoxicated by meat and liquor these *sants* (holy men) who have come from Kashi have got ruined. You spread the name of Satnam. I am Satnampurush, know me.' So Ghasidas said, 'Who will believe my word since in order to look after my wife and two children I work for other people?' Satnampurush answered, 'I shall bring all the sants to you. You give them *pan* (betel leaf) and make them repeat the name of Satnam.' Ghasidas, once again, refused; Satnampurush tied two pieces of coconut to Ghasidas' clothes.

The encounter was critical for the definition of relationships between Satnampurush, Ghasidas, and the Chamars within Satnampanth. First, Ghasidas is the person who had been sent by Satnampurush to reform the Chamars. The Chamars, in turn, are a *vansh*, a lineage. The use of a metaphor of kinship emphasizes the boundedness of Chamars as a community: a collectivity whose destiny could be orchestrated by its mythic figures. Ghasidas had forgotten to reform his own people, his *vansh*, and was working for others. The Chamars, as a result, had taken to *mas madira* (meat and liquor); the sants from Kashi had been ruined. In the reference to Kashi what is at work, perhaps, is a coming together of Satnami notions of their origins in the north,³⁶ and the fact that *Kashi ke sant* conferred a ritually pure status on the Chamars. Second, it was of essence that this state of purity be restored. The Chamars had to be reformed through knowing Satnam; the name of Satnam had to be spread. Satnampurush was to bring the Chamars to a reluctant Ghasidas. Third, Ghasidas' refusal to follow the orders of Satnampurush was on account of his working for other people: he had to accept the apparent subordination that followed in order to look after his wife and children.

Ghasidas took the plough and the bullocks to the master. The master said, 'Ghasidas I shall not have you work because your body appears peculiar to me. It seems as though you have a *mukut* (crown),

chatarbhuj (four arms), and a *shankh* (conch shell). I have never seen your body like this.' The master, overwhelmed by the form, cried 'Jai Guru Ghasidas' and fell at Ghasidas' feet. The reversal which had begun with the change in the relation of Ghasidas' body to the nagar had been completed by the submission of the Marar master. The master's act was brought about, as the repetition within the narrative emphasizes, by the change in Ghasidas' form after his encounter with Satnampurush. The transformed *roop* of Ghasidas was implicated in the establishment of Ghasidas as a guru. It proved the final step in effecting a resolution of the contradiction between the authority of Ghasidas—a low-caste labourer and ploughman—and his middle-caste agricultural master. At the same time, what lay ahead were trials, ordeals, and obstacles. These constituted a 'barrier'.³⁷ The 'barrier' had to be overcome before Ghasidas was initiated into his new status.

Ghasidas was to lose his two children and his wife. When he came back from the Marar's house the children ran up to him and ate the pieces of coconut. Ghasidas' wife gave him water and food. After eating, when he sat down, the children died. Ghasidas was being put through an ordeal. The coconut, we need to recall, had been tied to Ghasidas' clothes by Satnampurush. Ghasidas was taken by surprise; the response of his wife and neighbours was of bewilderment and anguish. The children were buried with the advice of the *jati*.³⁸ After three days Ghasidas took the ritual bath, finished other *jati* rituals, and slept with his wife. The wife died at night. She too was buried. What is striking is the very ordinariness of the acts of Ghasidas, of eating and of sleeping with his wife, which led to the deaths. The acts spoke of routine domesticity and of ties within the family. With the death of his children and his wife the ties were broken, the domesticity was no more:

Ghasidas *akele rah gaye, vairagya utpanna ho gaya* (Ghasidas was left alone, a mood of renunciation set in). He went to a mountain in Sonakhan. There Satnampurush assumed the form of a tiger and ran towards him. So Ghasidas said, 'Yes, you have eaten three; eat me as well.' The tiger bowed his head. Then Satnampurush assumed the form of a python. Ghasidas went up to him and asked to be eaten; the python bowed his head. When night fell, Ghasidas climbed a Tendu tree and put a *phansi* (noose) around his neck; the noose left him and he sat down. Ghasidas thought that he had not tied the noose properly. A second time he tied his neck tightly

to the Tendu tree; the branch of the tree bent down and reached the ground. Satnampurush assumed the *chatarbhuj roop* (four-armed form) and stood aside. He then said to Ghasidas that he had again forgotten to worship Satnam. He was asked to spread the name of Satnam and make the place into a *dham* (a site of pilgrimage) and get it worshipped: 'You do tap here for six months and the Chamars nearby will come to this dham. You feed them pan; get them to worship the name of Satnam; the idols of gods and goddesses in their houses should be thrown out.' Ghasidas replied that his wife and children had died and he was being asked to get a name worshipped. He could not do it. So Satnampurush said to Ghasidas, 'I will make everyone alive, but the name of Satnam should be spread. I am telling you to do tap here; after six months I will make your son and daughter alive.' After saying this Satnampurush disappeared and Ghasidas started doing tap there. In the mean while, people of the caste and family tried to find Ghasidas. When they could not find him they gave the funeral feast. For six months Ghasidas did tap. He purified his body. For six months he left all food and drink. After six months Satnam emerged again in the same form. Ghasidas recognized that roop and touched the feet of Satnam. At the place where Satnam had kept his feet there emerged a *kund* (pond). From that pond *amrit* (nectar) was obtained. In that water Satnam made Ghasidas have a bath and then gave him amrit. Satnampurush then asked Ghasidas, 'Now have you experienced Satnam (*Satnam ki partit hui*)?' Ghasidas answered, 'Maharaj, I have experienced your roop (*Apke roop ki partit ho gayi*)'. Telling him the *vidhi* (rule) of making *shishya* (disciples), Satnampurush brought Ghasidas to *asli tapsthan* (the real/original place of worship) and asked him to give *nariyal* (coconut) and pan and spread the name of Satnam. Satnampurush said, 'I shall give all the Chamars the dream of this name and send them to this place' and then went back to his *lok* (world).

This can be read as the story of the initiation of Ghasidas that was directed by Satnampurush. Satnampurush, in various guises, put Ghasidas through the ordeal of death. The revelation by Satnampurush of his true form, after Ghasidas failed to see that it was he who held the noose, was a statement of the power of Satnampurush. Ghasidas' mistake was that he still did not know Satnampurush; he had not worshipped and spread the name of Satnam. Satnampurush instructed him on what had to be done for the creation of Satnampanth; Ghasidas refused. It was the assurance that he would make Ghasidas' wife and children alive which resolved the problem. In their first meeting

Satnampurush had emphasized that Ghasidas had to know him: '*Mein khud Satnampurush hoon mujhe pahchan*' (I am Satnampurush, recognize/know me). The later events resulted from his inadequate *pahchanana* (knowing/recognition) of Satnam. It was after Ghasidas carried out the instructions of Satnampurush and cleansed his body through tap that full recognition followed. To know/recognize Satnampurush was to accept Satnam. Satnampurush created the kund, gave Ghasidas amrit, and purified him: he conducted Ghasidas' rite of initiation. Satnampurush also provided that little extra—the rule for creating disciples, a dream to the Chamars—that gurus need. The conditions of possibility of Ghasidas becoming the guru of a reformed *chamarvansh*, of the creation of Satnampanth, had been fulfilled.

The theme is familiar: a figure new to a mythic tradition passes through ordeals set up by the supreme deity till the final moment when the mythic figure recognizes the deity's powers and is simultaneously incorporated into the mythic tradition.³⁹ At the same time, what we find in the Satnami mythic tradition is a play on the familiar theme. The relationship between Satnampurush and Ghasidas is ambiguous. The ambiguity, I suggest, is linked to the specific character of the mythic tradition of Satnampanth. The Satnami mythic tradition was a new construct: both Ghasidas and Satnampurush, unknown in their specific roop had to be established within this mythic tradition. What we find is a double movement: Ghasidas had to pass through trials and ordeals set up by Satnampurush before he was initiated as a guru; Ghasidas in turn put Satnampurush through tests. From the moment of their first encounter, at each step, Satnampurush had to counter the resistance offered by Ghasidas. In the trials which Ghasidas underwent with the tiger and the python the tables were turned. Ghasidas recognized that it was Satnampurush who had come in the form of the tiger and the python; when he addressed Satnampurush he offered a challenge: 'Yes, you have eaten three, eat me as well.' The tiger, the python, the branch of the tree, bowed down before Ghasidas. The note of resistance was struck, once again, when Ghasidas refused to follow the orders of Satnampurush because his wife and children had been taken away from him. All this is related to the fact that Ghasidas, in spite of the mood of renunciation (*vairagya*), is not quite a 'world renouncer'. More about this a little later. My point here is that Ghasidas' resistance bore the mark of, and carried

forward the ambiguity in, the relationship between these two mythic figures. It was by tying the pieces of coconut to Ghasidas' clothes, by effecting a separation between Ghasidas and his wife and children, by setting up ordeals, by providing the assurance that his wife and children would be made alive, by directing this dramatic course of events that Satnampurush was recognized in his true roop by Ghasidas. Two new mythic figures were established within a new mythic tradition.⁴⁰ We can, of course, follow a mode of reading which hunts out and effects resolutions within a text. We can then argue that the challenges offered by Ghasidas and the elements which denied the ambiguous character of the relationship between the two figures were no more than steps in a sequential pattern. The moment of Ghasidas' recognition of the true form of Satnampurush was the moment of resolution: it established the superiority of Satnampurush over Ghasidas. Such a strategy of reading—marked by an ease born out of familiarity—would, however, be an imposition. It obscures the fact that the ambiguity in the relationship between Satnampurush and Ghasidas is structured into the Satnami mythic tradition. The Satnamis, when questioned specifically on the matter, distinguish between the two figures who occupied separate worlds. At the same time, in the course of conversation, the powers, and in fact the figures of Ghasidas and Satnampurush, are often conflated. Vijay Guru, the present Satnami Guru, said that 'Ghasidas was Satpurush, he was everything.'⁴¹ The confusion, the mix up, I would like to suggest has to do with a characteristic of an oral tradition. An oral tradition can sustain multiple identities so that a character does not have to be either 'a' or 'b'; s/he can be 'a' and 'b' at the same time. In an allegorical mode of reading rooted within an oral tradition the metaphoric juxtaposition of 'a' and 'b' effectively implies that to say that 'a' is 'b' is both to say that 'a' is 'a' and that 'a' is 'b'. In the Satnami mythic tradition the confusion between Ghasidas and Satnampurush was the narrative equivalent of metaphor. Satnampurush was a metaphor of power: what was important was the metaphoric juxtaposition of Satnampurush and Ghasidas.⁴² The Satnami mythic tradition, we have seen, worked towards certain kinds of resolutions. A clear separation and sorting out of the identities of Ghasidas and Satnampurush was not one of them. The ambiguity and tension in the relationship between Ghasidas and Satnampurush was not resolved in terms of one being superior

to the other; it was handled by the two figures working in tandem, each giving his power and attributes to the other, establishing and reinforcing the Satnami mythic tradition.

The constitution of Ghasidas as a guru was premised upon elements of different symbolic systems. Ghasidas had to 'renounce' his wife and children, to be dead to the world, and to perform tap to cleanse his body. He was a novice who was purified by Satnampurush through amrit before he was initiated into his new status.⁴³ At the same time, Ghasidas went through the exercise only after Satnampurush gave him his word that the wife and children would be brought back to life. Moreover, Ghasidas did not come back as a 'renouncer'; he was brought to the world, reclaimed by his jati people—who had earlier buried him. In the mythic tradition of Satnampanth Ghasidas' wife had both been sleeping and been dead for six months. It was, significantly, after Ghasidas woke her up, brought her back to life, and fixed her broken arm that Chamars started becoming Satnamis in large numbers. Finally, Ghasidas possessed the characteristics of a saint, a shaman, a healer. He fulfilled his followers' desire for the birth of a child, gave a blind Banjara (gypsy) the gift of sight, cured snake-bites and repaired bodies.⁴⁴ Healing is a mode of coping with and transforming an oppressive social order. The signs of physical discord are also the signifiers of an aberrant world; the desired transformations in the world focus upon healing as a mode of coping with and transforming an oppressive social order.⁴⁵ Ghasidas healed the bodies of members of Satnampanth.

An Oppositional Symbolic Order: Rituals and Practices

The initiation of Ghasidas launched Satnampanth.⁴⁶ The ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution provided a set of focal signs that were appropriated by Satnampanth: the Panth cast off impure substances and practices. Ghasidas' rite of initiation had cleansed and purified his body. Ghasidas forbade the Satnamis meat, liquor, tobacco, and certain pulses and vegetables which were the bearers of impurity and, often, the signifiers of a low ritual status. The members of Satnampanth were prohibited the use of cows for cultivation and were asked not to plough after the midday meal. The Satnamis, as Chamars, had removed the carcasses of cows, bullocks, and buffaloes within the

village; they had a claim on the skins and the flesh, which they ate, of the dead animals. The new prohibitions which effected a change in the Satnami relationship with the sacred cow sought to end the stigma attached to their earlier caste practice and to establish a claim of purity. The rejection of caste distinctions within Satnampanth was, similarly, accompanied by prohibitions: Satnamis did not accept water from a non-Satnami; members of impure castes—for instance, Dhobis (washermen), Ghasias (a caste involved in taking care of horses and looking after stables), and Mehtars (sweepers)—were not allowed into Satnampanth.⁴⁷

The accent within Satnampanth was on the purity of the body. The purity had to be maintained. The gurus played a critical role. An annual fair at Bhandar, the home of Ghasidas, was a major pilgrimage for members of Satnampanth. Moreover, Ghasidas began the tradition of *ramat*: the gurus travelled to areas with a concentration of Satnami population to provide darshan. In the pilgrimage to Bhandar and during *ramat* the Satnamis offered coconuts and money to the guru and then drank the water, amrit, in which they had washed the gurus' feet; they also carried back amrit to their villages in hollow bamboo pipes. Amrit purified the body within Satnampanth. It had an important role, at moments of crisis, when Satnampanth was thrown into disarray. The deputy superintendent of police, Raipur, in the context of the famine of 1868–9, noted:

Even Satnamee Chamars who by the precepts of their faith are forbidden to indulge in animal food thought nothing of stealing, killing and eating buffaloes and cows or even of devouring such as they found dead. They also indulged in *Mussor* and certain *Bhajeas* or spinaches which in times of greater plenty they had prided themselves in abstaining from, about which unorthodox practices when taunted by their neighbours, who rejoiced in seeing the reformers breaking through their rules and observances, they would excuse themselves by saying that necessity had no laws and all that they would have to do would be to obtain absolution from the *Gooru*.⁴⁸

The breaking of rules and transgression of norms did not, of course, require moments of crisis. They occurred in the everyday life of Satnam. Amrit was a purificatory mode which continuously integrated Satnams into Satnampanth. We have here another instance of the repositioning of a sign and practice embedded within the divine and ritual hierarchy of dominant Hinduism.⁴⁹ The Satnami gurus

had claimed the *charanamrit* from the deities of the Hindu pantheon and the superordinates within the ritual hierarchy of caste society. The appropriation of *charanamrit*, which purified bodies, was one more step in the construction of the oppositional symbolic order of Satnampanth.

Satnampanth interrogated caste by drawing upon the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution. The argument needs to be worked out in steps. Louis Dumont has suggested the existence of a consensus which cuts across castes within the Hindu social order.⁵⁰ Michael Moffat has worked out the argument for an untouchable community.⁵¹ We can extend and radicalize their work to suggest that the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution constitutes one of the principal defining axes of the hegemonic and dominant symbolic order.⁵² However, hegemony should not be turned into a closed system of total ideological and cultural control by dominant groups. An axiomatic limitation of ideological domination is the impossibility of total subjection: dominant discourse cannot reach all parts of every people, and the corollary to this is that it is impossible to be certain of the effects on the parts it does reach.⁵³ The ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution cannot exhaust the range of practice, energy, and intention of all actors, each caste, within the social order. We can, in fact, argue that the symbols within the hegemonic ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution are differentially appropriated within caste society.⁵⁴ As Sperber puts it, 'a symbolic representation determines a focal condition, determines an evocational field, but does not determine the paths of evocation.'⁵⁵ The ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution acted as an evocational field which set limits on Satnampanth. At the same time, Satnampanth followed a path of evocation of symbols which defined its cultural autonomy: Satnampanth interrogated caste by subverting the hegemonic symbolic order and, in specifying its trajectory, effected radical ruptures within the evocational field.

Satnampanth not only drew upon, it also rejected elements of the ritual hierarchy within caste society. Satnampurush had asked Ghasidas to chase out the gods and goddesses from their houses. The gods and goddesses were active members of the cosmic order: they were the beings who defined and sustained a divine hierarchy. We know of the close connection between divine and social hierarchy within caste society. A person's ritual status is closely tied to his/her access to gods within the divine hierarchy.⁵⁶ The matrix was operated by

gods and goddesses. The Satnami mythic tradition rejected the devidevtas (gods and goddesses) who were themselves *murtipujak* (idol worshipping) beings. Ghasidas, in a dramatic move which sought to abolish the marks of a low ritual status, countered the machinations of village gods and goddesses by throwing them into the rubbish heap. Satnampanth had no temples. The members of Satnampanth were to worship Satnam; they were to repeat his name, morning and evening, facing the sun. Moreover, the abolition of the divine hierarchy was accompanied by a rejection of the figure of the priest whose place and function are closely tied to the ritual hierarchy within caste society. Satnampurush and the gurus were established as the mythic figures who displaced the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon; the *bhandari* replaced the priest within Satnampanth. The *bhandari*, as a nominated representative of the guru in a village, conducted the life-cycle rituals and played a major role in the festivals of the Satnamis. Finally, the rituals and rites of passage within Satnampanth underscored the closeness, the bounded nature, of the Satnamis. In the case of the rite of initiation to Satnampanth, for instance, it was the Satnami panchayat which decided when the ceremony was to be held; the entire Satnami population of the village participated; the rite of initiation was conducted and the final act of incorporation was performed by the *bhandari*.⁵⁷

Satnampanth drew upon diverse symbolic orders. This was evident in the constitution of Ghasidas as a guru. Similarly, two of its critical defining signs, the *chauka*, a square made with lines of wheat flour, and the *kanthi*, a necklace of wooden beads, were appropriated from Kabirpanth.⁵⁸ These symbolic forms were signifiers of difference: the Satnamis were distinct from *shaktas*, the followers of Kali. It needs to be pointed out, in fact, that the abstinence from meat, liquor, tobacco, and certain pulses and vegetables within Satnampanth drew upon both the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and the pre-existent traditions of Kabirpanth, and, perhaps, on the Satnami 'movement' of Jagjiwanddas in the late eighteenth century in Awadh.⁵⁹ The constitution of Satnampanth occurred within a symbolic universe filled with polysemic and multiple referential substances and practices. It followed a process of symbolic construction which drew upon existent hegemonies and traditions and situated the symbolic forms in a new context.⁶⁰ The repositioned signs entered into new relationships with each other and pressed new associations within Satnampanth;

they reinforced each other as markers which defined the boundary of Satnampanth in relation to other groups.

The symbolic forms defined and sustained Satnampanth as an oppositional order. We saw that Satnampanth worked towards a pure body. The body constitutes a frame of selfhood in individual and collective experience; it provides a constellation of signs which signify the relations of persons to their contexts. The construction of the self and of the universe of social and natural relations of which it is a part are carried out through the body.⁶¹ In the ritual hierarchy of caste society the body of a person is a repository of signs of purity and pollution. These signs constitute the self by defining a person's ritual status within the system of relationships in the caste hierarchy. Moreover, in this system of ritual ranking there is a continuity between the body social and the body personal: the caste, literally as a body, affords and transmits the signs of ritual status embodied by its members.⁶²

Satnampanth was the creation of a pure body which, in turn, invested the bodies of its members with signs of ritual purity. The purified and transformed body effected the constitution of a new self of the Satnamis. Satnampanth, through the appropriation and repositioning of the signs and practices of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution, and the symbolic forms of other traditions, and through the rejection of divine hierarchy and the figure of the priest (which are all closely tied to social hierarchy), interrogated and disrupted the hegemonic symbolic order. The creation of a transformed body and a new self within Satnampanth was, simultaneously, the transformation of an oppressive world held in place by the dominant symbolic order. At the same time, there were limits to the challenge: the self and the world fashioned by Satnampanth reproduced the significance of old meanings.⁶³

Guru Ghasidas, the Gond Raja, *Angrez Sarkar*, and Danteshwari Devi

The establishment of the authority of Ghasidas required him to displace other figures of authority within the social and cosmic order. The classic manner of displacement within a mythic tradition takes the form of a mythic figure totally eclipsing the other mythic

figures.⁶⁴ In Satnampanth this happened with the village gods and goddesses who were thrown into a rubbish heap. At the same time, the Satnami gurus also effected displacements by demarcating their sphere of authority. The exercise, once again, served to constitute the boundary of Satnampanth. I shall take three instances: Ghasidas' encounters with a Gond raja and *Angrez* sarkar, and his relationship with Danteshwari Devi.

The construction of Satnampanth as a confrontational enterprise which challenged the hegemonic symbolic order and relations of power within Chhattisgarh was followed by attacks by dominant groups. The attacks have been encapsulated into a Satnami myth. Soon after the establishment of Satnampanth, the Gond raja of Sonakhan got the news that a Chamar by the name of Ghasidas was accumulating money and coconuts in his kingdom. The raja perpetrated an injustice and told Ghasidas that he wanted half the money and coconuts as his share. Ghasidas replied that he had only betel leaves and coconuts and no money; he agreed to give a share of the betel leaves and the coconuts if the king desired. The king took half the coconuts and then said, 'I am in debt; help me pay the debt of fifty thousand rupees or I will kill the moneylender.'⁶⁵ When the king killed the moneylender Ghasidas knew that *pap* (sin) had entered the place and it would be better for him to move out. On the day of Maghi Puno (the night of the full moon in the month of Magh, February–March) the king sent soldiers to Ghasidas' house. There were a few of Ghasidas' men among the soldiers. It struck them that they had surrounded the guru's house, but if they were to catch him it would be a grave insult to Satnampanth. They began to sing *bhajans* (devotional songs): all the soldiers became devotees of Ghasidas. The soldiers broke open the door and prepared the way for Ghasidas to escape. Ghasidas reached a village; the villagers started celebrating Maghi Puno; the king of Sonakhan attacked; Ghasidas had to leave. The pattern repeated itself as Ghasidas went from one village to another.

The attacks by the raja of Sonakhan occurred on the day of Maghi Puno and, in fact, were provoked by the celebration of the festival. Maghi Puno had been established as a sacred *tithi* (date) for Satnampanth by Ghasidas. It was a festival of importance, a critical marker in the Satnami calendar.⁶⁶ Maghi Puno was implicated in the definition of the boundary of Satnampanth. This underscores the

significance of the play of this symbolic form in the representation of attacks on Satnamis. The numerous attacks on Ghasidas at various places on the day of Maghi Puno are, to my mind, an encapsulation, a form of collective remembering, of the attacks on the Satnamis. The exercise served, simultaneously, to strengthen the boundary of Satnampanth. At the same time, there is a subplot in this story; the relationship between Ghasidas and the king of Sonakhan. Ghasidas' response to the king's demand for money and coconuts served to demarcate their respective spheres of authority. Ghasidas said that he had only betel leaves and coconuts and no money. The betel leaves and coconut—offered to the guru by his disciples and an important medium in the rituals and practices of Satnampanth—were comprehensive icons of Ghasidas' authority. Equally, Ghasidas accepted the authority of the king; he agreed to give a share of the betel leaves and the coconuts if the king wanted. The difficulty was that the king was unjust; he had been visited by pap. The soldiers, the instruments of the king's unjust authority, were won over by the just and moral authority of Ghasidas. Ghasidas had, in any case, made up his mind to leave; the soldiers provided him with a way out of a place contaminated by sin. Ghasidas' move from one village to another, all of them celebrating Maghi Puno, was a statement of his authority, of the spread of Satnampanth.

Ghasidas had built a house in Bhandar which he had to abandon because of the attacks by the raja of Sonakhan. After the establishment of British rule he returned to Bhandar. Ghasidas had lived there for ten years when the *angrez raja* (English king) received the news about the guru. Soldiers carrying the orders of Agnew Sahib and Mulki Sahib came from Raipur: Ghasidas had been summoned to the capital. Ghasidas went to the capital sitting in a *doli* (a palanquin). In a characteristic move, the *doli* reserved for use by upper castes (a signifier of status and rank within the caste hierarchy), had been appropriated by Ghasidas.⁶⁷ The act of appropriation was an expropriation of the dominant; upper castes, the expropriators, had been divested of their monopoly over a symbol that was constitutive of their domination. Ghasidas had adequately answered the summons of the sahib.

Ghasidas arrived in Raipur. His authority in the capital was awesome. The news of the guru's capture had travelled all around: tens of thousands of Satnamis reached there. As a result Ghasidas had to sit

on a *chaupai* (a small cot), high up on a tree, where he could be visible to all.⁶⁸ To see and to be seen by Ghasidas was darshan, a spectacle, which affected thousands of Satnami devotees. The substance of Ghasidas' authority, in the seat of the angrez raja, was transmitted through sight.⁶⁹ The *chaprasi* (peon) gave the news of Ghasidas' arrival. The sahib ordered that Ghasidas be called; Ghasidas reached in the evening. The use of language, the particular construction, in the narrative suggests a contrast. There was an immediacy, an urgency, about the order to call Ghasidas; Ghasidas' response was to delay. The delay was deliberate: to wait upon a superior is an aspect of subordination; Ghasidas' act was a reversal and a form of resistance against the colonial regimentation of time.⁷⁰ The sahib got the peon to give Ghasidas a *lota* (a small vessel) of *sharbat* (a sweet drink) which contained poison. Ghasidas drank it. Ghasidas' acceptance of the poisoned drink was his acceptance of the sahib's authority and of a challenge. He returned to his *aasan* (seat) on the tree. When the night was over the colonial authorities sent the peon to see whether Ghasidas was alive or dead. They were informed that he was alive. Ghasidas had passed the trial. The sahib called Ghasidas again: both the sahib and the *memsahib* did *salaam* (saluted him). Ghasidas said Satnam and put both his hands on their heads.

Ghasidas' authority as a guru had been recognized by the angrez sahib. At the same time, the sahib, within the terms of colonial administrative lexicon, considered him a *kachha* (weak) guru who had to be tested further. He wrote down Danteshwari on a piece of paper. The sahib's command was not merely expressed in, it was also shaped by writing; the written form bore the mark and was constitutive of the sahib's command, which was a concrete form of colonial authority.⁷¹ Ghasidas was sent with a chaprasi to Danteshwari Devi (the man-eating tribal goddess to whom human sacrifices were made) in Bastar. It was an eight-day journey to the devi's shrine. After being taken there Ghasidas was put inside the devi's temple and the doors were locked. The devi emerged from water; the doors of the temple opened.

The encounter between Danteshwari and Ghasidas demarcated the separate complementary spheres of authority and the different spaces inhabited by the two mythic figures. Danteshwari lived in water; Ghasidas on land. The goddess addressed Ghasidas as 'Bade' which, in Chhattisgarhi, is a mode of address reserved for the husband's elder

brother. In the kinship network of the Satnami cosmic order, the relationship between Ghasidas and Danteshwari was situated on an axis which bound them through mutual avoidance. Danteshwari asked him, 'Why have you come here?' Ghasidas made it clear that he was there because he was obeying the king and asked Danteshwari to eat him. Danteshwari replied that she ate all jatis (castes/communities) except Satnamis; she asked Ghasidas to spread the name of Satnam. Ghasidas pledged that he would not betray Danteshwari: she would not get mas (meat), madira (liquor), the substances she devoured, in Satnampanth. The goddess instructed Ghasidas further that he should give coconut, *pakka bhojan* (food cooked in clarified oil), and *chauka*—substances which carried purity—to his devotees: she will not trouble the beings in his *teerth* (place of pilgrimage). It was the purity of Satnampanth, the avoidance of meat and liquor, which made Danteshwari encourage Ghasidas' endeavour. The space inhabited by Satnampanth was a *teerth*, a holy place. The reinforcement of the boundary of this space, through a continuous purification of the body, maintained the distance between Danteshwari and Ghasidas. The maintenance of distance was the mutual acceptance of each other's authority and of the relationship of avoidance which bound Danteshwari Devi and Ghasidas.

Balakdas and the Janeu

Ghasidas had established Satnampanth; after his death—which I discuss later—Balakdas took over from his father. The interrogation of the symbolic order of caste society was accompanied by a critique of the emergent symbolic order of colonial power within the Satnami mythic tradition. The simultaneous movement was first introduced in Ghasidas' encounter with the angrez raja. It is underscored by the myth about Balakdas and the *janeu*.

It was on the day of Ghasidas' *kriya ki roti* (funeral feast) that Balakdas told the Satnamis who had assembled that Ghasidas had appeared in a dream and told him that there was *janeu* (the sacred thread which is the mark of the twice-born in caste society) in Ravidas' *kul* (lineage). Ghasidas had said, 'I had given them kanthi; you spread the *janeu*.' There is a complicity between the writing of British administrators and the upper-caste people to whom I talked about the incident: both

depict it as an act born of the inordinate vanity of Balakdas. This fits well with, as an instance of, the caste stereotype of the Satnamis as an arrogant people. The Satnami version, on the other hand, emphasizes the continuity with the past. The wearing of the sacred thread by the Satnamis was the last wish of Ghasidas; it was conveyed on the day of the funeral feast/the last life-cycle ritual, of Ghasidas. Ghasidas had played with a continuity in the dream. There was sacred thread in Ravidas' kul; Ghasidas had distributed the kanthi; Balakdas was to honour Ghasidas' word through the spread of the sacred thread. The janeu had become a principle of Satnami faith. The enterprise had the critical support of members of the guru's family and key members within Satnampanth. When they went to Balakdas wearing the janeu the guru was pleased: 'Our kul is fortunate.'

The appropriation of the sacred thread by a low caste is, often, snapped up by the master discourse of Sanskritization.⁷² I find several problems with such a strategy. Satnampanth appropriated the signs afforded by the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution and by other popular traditions which had begun as an alternative to the caste system. Second, it rejected and overturned key elements of the divine and social hierarchy within caste society. Finally, the janeu was an addition, an accretion, to the Satnami mythic tradition: a part of a process of symbolic construction which situated the sign in a new context and interrogated the caste system.⁷³ The concept, it seems to me, is used to produce a pat answer: it tends to circumvent an analysis of the processes and the logic of the symbolic construction of low-caste endeavour. Moreover, placing the Satnami appropriation of the sacred thread within the framework of Sanskritization—agreeing with or providing a critique of the master category—misses the simultaneity of the critique of caste society and the alien British rule within Satnampanth.⁷⁴

The wearing of the sacred thread by the Satnamis, an oppositional step, led to a conflict with the upper castes and brought into play colonial law.⁷⁵ The news about the janeu spread from one village to another. The *agyani* (ignorant) Hindus created an organization which resolved to kill Balakdas. At the same time, the Hindus were worried: Balakdas had to be found alone for their plan to succeed. Once, Balakdas was travelling with a few companions. The Hindus initiated a quarrel but could not harm Balakdas. The Satnamis appealed to

colonial authorities. There was an enquiry. The Raipur *kutcherry* (court) asked Balakdas if he had distributed the janeu among Satnamis. The guru, of course, did not lie. He won the case. The *haakims* (officials) were given a bribe of a thousand rupees. They arrested five Satnamis who were kept in a *hawalat* (jail). The sarkar, to test the Satnamis and to get more money from the Hindus, went 'against its law' and gave each of them five *bathos* (the *katha* is a large measure) of grain to grind. The Satnamis said, 'We shall do *Snan Sandhya* (the evening purificatory practice) and then we shall grind.' The Satnamis prepared themselves by defecating and taking a bath in the evening. They put the grain in the *chakki* in front of soldiers. As soon as they said Satnam and moved the handle, the *chakki* burst. The peon told the officers that the *chakki* had broken. The officials thought that the Satnamis had deliberately, as an act of mischief, broken the *chakki* and ordered that they be given another *chakki*. In the mean time, the officers called the five Satnamis and in front of the Hindus asked, 'What is your caste?' The answer: 'Satnami: The decision about food and drink was taken by Ghasidas. When he heard about the janeu of Ravidas, Balakdas has made us wear it. Satnam is *sancha* [true/pure], any other name is *asancha* [false/impure]. This is all we know.' In front of the Hindus the officers wrote on small pieces of paper: the papers contained orders: wear the janeu; put on a *tilak*; keep a *choti*. After this the janeu started being worn in many villages.

There are two inextricably linked themes in this story; the truth of Satnam and the legitimacy of the Satnami endeavour; the relationship of the Satnamis with *angrez sarkar* (colonial authority). It was critical for the Hindus to find Balakdas alone. In Satnami self-perception they are defeated only when there is a division within their ranks or when they are disunited. Balakdas had only a few companions: this was an invitation for the Hindus to attack. The few Satnamis were too many; they were united; Balakdas could not be killed. The Satnamis were loyal subjects. After the quarrel it was they who appealed to the sarkar. In the court it was the straightforward answer of Balakdas—the power of his word which carried the truth of Satnam—that won him the law suit. The government was, however, corruptible; the five Satnamis were jailed because the officials had been bribed. Moreover, the sarkar went against its own law when the Satnamis were given five *kathas* of grain to grind. The Satnami mythic tradition drew upon a language

of law and legality and used it to criticize the sarkar, the power that had created the grammar of the language. The Satnamis, however, obeyed the king's orders. They created the conditions in which Satnam could operate. It was after they had purified themselves that they faced the ordeal of grinding five kathas of grain in the chakki. In popular imagination the chakki—as in the reference to chakki *peesna*—is a symbolic form deeply evocative of subjection within the disciplinary institution of the prison. The power of Satnam burst the chakki. The sarkar did not recognize what lay behind the breaking of the chakki and it was understood as a deliberate act of Satnami mischief. It was, in fact, after the Satnamis stated in a brief and simple fashion the truth of Satnam that recognition came to the angrez sarkar. The Satnamis had passed the trial. The questioning of the exercise of colonial law combined with the truth, legitimacy and power of Satnam reveals the glimmer of a version of an alternative legality; Satnamis had triumphed over the sarkar which at different points had shown itself to be corrupt and ignorant, unjust and unlawful. At the same time, the Satnami claim over the janeu, tilak and choti—the signifiers of upper-caste domination—was established through the orders of government officers which were, characteristically, inscribed in writing on small pieces of paper.

Balakdas: A Conqueror

We have, in recent years, had forceful critiques of the Dumontian concept of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution as the overarching organizing principle, the underlying structural logic, of caste society in South Asia. The emphasis on 'the complex and conjectural foundations of hierarchical relations' and 'several contextually shifting relations of inter-caste relationships apparent in everyday village social life' has focused on the ideological, religious, and cultural character of kingship and the dominant caste.⁷⁶ What is at issue is, of course, the question of power in caste society. My emphasis on the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution as one of the defining axes of the hegemonic and dominant symbolic order situates relations of power as central to this evocational field. I would like to suggest, moreover, that the construct of a ritual and religious, cultural and ideological kingship and dominant caste was also a critical axis of the hegemonic symbolic

order. We need to remember that the social world of Chhattisgarh was populated by numerous feudatory chiefs. We also have evidence of ritually significant prestations and endowments made by dominant caste groups. The mythic tradition of Satnampanth did not replicate the features of a culturally and ritually significant kingship and dominant caste; it engaged with the construct to fashion the guru as a figure who possessed some of its attributes and, significantly, was on par with the king. The move, initiated by Ghasidas' encounter with the Gond raja, was consolidated by Balakdas.

In the Satnami mythic tradition Balakdas is cast in the mould of a conqueror. He set up an organizational hierarchy which extended from the guru at the top to *raj mahants*, *mahants*, *diwans* and, finally, *bhandaris* and *sathidars*.⁷⁷ The organizational structure of Satnampanth constituted an alternate ritual and symbolic centre of power to kings and dominant caste groups. Balakdas called his men and asked them to get ready to go to villages. The Satnami population had to be acquainted with the key members of the organizational hierarchy. Balakdas was, on the one hand, accompanied by Sarha and Judai, two mythic warriors of Satnampanth, who were adept at using swords and guns, and four thousand other *veers* (warriors), and, on the other, by a thousand *sants* (holy men). Balakdas put on a *tilak* and a *janeu* and, significantly, also tied a *bhala* (spear), *talwar* (sword), *banduk* (gun), and rode on a decorated elephant. The impressive cavalcade moved from one village to another. Satnamis of all villages came in their thousands. The mood was joyous; the Satnamis sang *panthi geet* (songs of Satnampanth). After the guru's *darshan* they showered Balakdas with gold, silver, and clothes; Balakdas had begun his dramatic conquest.

In the course of his *daura* (tour), Balakdas encountered figures of royal authority. The king of Nandgaon took away a horse and broke the *kanthi* of a few Satnamis. Balakdas got the news. He made it clear that as a guru he did not fight with anyone. Instead he gave a *shrap* (curse) to the raja: the *gaddi* (throne) of Nandgaon could never have a legitimate heir. The curse has not lifted till this day. The raja of Khairagarh decided to test Balakdas. He had meat put in a *katori* (a small round vessel) which was then covered with a piece of cloth. The king asked Balakdas what the *katori* contained. Balakdas said that it had pieces of coconut. When the vessel was uncovered the

meat had, indeed, turned into coconut. The raja gave Balakdas a *puruskar* (prize) and declared that he was a true guru. The raja then got a letter from the Hindu king of Bilaspur to kill Balakdas. The raja of Khairagarh returned the letter with the reply, '*maare so mare*' (the one who kills shall be put to death). An order was passed against the killing of Balakdas in the kingdom of Khairagarh. Balakdas was called by the raja of Kawardha, who made the guru sit next to him: on the axis of spatial distance, a measure of dominant and subordinate status, Balakdas had been accorded a position of equality. The raja had heard that Balakdas' body had a *dashavtari chap* (the imprint of the ten incarnations of the god Vishnu) and wanted to see it. Balakdas took off his clothes and showed the *chinha* (signs) on his body. The raja was happy; he performed *vandana* (worship) and gave the guru money from his treasury. The spheres inhabited by the king and Balakdas were complementary: the raja, as the ruler, rewarded Balakdas with money; the king was the supplicant, who performed *vandana*, before Balakdas, the guru. The literal measure of Balakdas' triumph in Kawardha was his entry into the inner space, the female and feminine domain, of the house of the raja. The raja's sister called him inside and made him her guru. Balakdas' success was spectacular. It was disorder compounded by betrayal which attended the death of Balakdas.

Death: Disruption, Disorder, and Betrayal

The death of a guru was the disruption of the cosmic order of Satnampanth. The critical event occurred in situations of disorder. It was, moreover, characterized by betrayal. Before Ghasidas' death Satnampanth was in a bad way. The Satnamis had forgotten to worship Satnam. Satnampurush had assured Ghasidas that he would take a human *avtar* and sort out the problems of Satnampanth. When Ghasidas' *bahu* (daughter-in-law) became pregnant, he asked his associates within Satnampanth if the child would be a boy or a girl. He was told that it would be a girl. Ghasidas was expecting a boy: the *avtar* of Satnampurush. The prophecy of the birth of a girl meant that he had, once again, to take on the responsibility of Satnampanth. Ghasidas had withdrawn from the world; he had to go into it again.

Ghasidas started building a house. When the workmen ran short of wood for the beams of the roof, Ghasidas gave an order to look

for a tree. The only tree to be found was a *bel* under which someone had, long back, buried a *trishul*. It was an awesome conspiracy of circumstances within the divine and cosmic order. Ghasidas remembered Satnam and struck the tree five times with his *tangiya* (axe). He sat down. Bel and trishul are the marks of Mahadeo (the god Shiva). The bel spread all over Ghasidas' body. The entire body became hot. Ghasidas asked the servants to bring the tree and went home. The guru, racked by pain, had food and went off to sleep. It was after this unfortunate and conspiratorial encounter with Mahadeo within the cosmic order that Balakdas' wife gave birth to a girl. Balakdas and other Satnamis were called at night. Ghasidas told them that Satnam-purush had betrayed them: instead of a boy a girl was born. Ghasidas announced, 'I shall go to Satnampurush . . . and ask him that you were going to take avtar, why has the opposite happened?' Ghasidas left his body with the Satnamis for two and a half days during his sojourn to meet Satnampurush. It was another betrayal, at this stage, which established the finality of Ghasidas' death. Balakdas, on discovering that Ghasidas' body was being guarded, had stated that the dead do not return. When Ghasidas came back after two and a half days he found that his last rites had been performed. The guru had to go back to the other world.

It was disorder combined with betrayal which, once again, lay behind the death of Balakdas. In the course of his tour Balakdas reached Bilaspur raj. The raja of Bilaspur, we need to recall, wanted Balakdas dead. To make matters worse Balakdas camped in *mauza* Amara Bandha, which was the heart of enemy territory. The Rajput Kshatriyas held a meeting and passed a resolution: the *shikar* (victim) has come into our house; we should not delay; he must be killed tonight. The night was ominous. It was cold and dark. The full moon of Pus (December–January) had been eclipsed by a cloud cover and torrential rain. The right eyes of Sarha and Judai, the two Satnami warriors, were fluttering. The constellation of stars spoke of a *yudh* (battle) that night. Balakdas and his group were to eat the evening meal at the house of Kariya Chamar. Kariya had taken money from the Kshatriyas; he was on their side. A Satnami had betrayed Satnampanth.

Balakdas tempted fate. He decided not to go to eat and sent off his group. There was only one Satnami with Balakdas in his tent. The Hindus attacked. They could identify Balakdas because he was

sitting on a chair wearing gold ornaments.⁷⁸ The first blow of the sword hit the chair. The second claimed the life of Kodu Bahiya. In the dim light, from a fire burning outside, the Hindus thought that they had killed Balakdas. The terror of the night was not over. Sarha and Judai were returning after the meal. They took the enemy to be their companions. The warriors were killed. The Hindus, convinced that they had completed their task, were going back when they heard the guru's companions shouting, 'Balakdasji, come this way.' The Hindus started looking for Balakdas. The dark night was suddenly illuminated by a flash of lightning. The Hindus saw Balakdas in his gold ornaments; they asked him who he was; the guru did not lie. A major fight broke out. Balakdas was killed amidst chaos. Horses and elephants left their places and ran, people ran helter-skelter and fought and killed, not recognizing each other.⁷⁹ Balakdas in death had lived a belief of Satnampanth: Satnamis can be defeated only when they are disunited.

I end this tale of the construction of Satnampanth as an oppositional symbolic order, a community, with the death of Balakdas. There are other myths, other questions, other tales.

Notes

1. This paper has been discussed with David Arnold, Ishita Banerjee, Crispin Bates, Partha Chatterjee, Veena Das, Leela Dube, S.C. Dube, David Ludden, Javed Majeed, Gyan Pandey, Sumit Sarkar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. The arguments and material it embodies have been presented in different forms at Delhi, Cambridge, New York, Santa Cruz, and Calcutta. The final version has benefited from detailed comments by Shahid Amin, Gautam Bhadra, David Hardiman and Rosalind O'Hanlon.
2. The paper is a part of a larger project on religion, community, law, and forms of resistance in Chhattisgarh in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it represents an intermediate step in my research.
3. I borrow the category of mythic tradition from Gananath Obeyesekere, extending it in a somewhat different way for Satnampanth. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Chicago, 1983).
4. C.U. Wills, 'The Territorial System of the Rajput Kingdoms of Mediaeval Chhattisgarh', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, N.S. 15 (1919), pp. 197-262; P.F. McEldowney, 'Colonial Administration and Social Development in the C.P. 1861-1921', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia (Microfilm, Ann Arbor, 1981), pp. 486-90.

5. Patrick vans Agnew, *A Report on the Subah or Province of Chhattisgarh written in 1820* (Nagpur, 1915); Richard Jenkins, *A Report on the Territories of the Raja of Nagpur 1827* (Nagpur, 1866); Bhagwan Singh Thakur, 'Chhattisgarh Mein Bhonsla Rajya', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ravi Shankar University (Raipur, 1974).
6. Agnew, pp. 20–3, 27–8, 40–5.
7. Ibid., pp. 4–5, 35–6; see also the comments of the chief commissioner in J.F.K. Hewitt, *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of Raepore District, Central Provinces* (Nagpur, 1896).
8. *Report on the Census of C.P. taken on 5 November 1866* (Nagpur, 1867); Parshotum Das, *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of Bilaspur District, 1886 to 1890* (Nagpur, 1892); E.R.K. Blenkinsop, *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of Durg Tehsil in the Raipur District 1896 to 1902* (Nagpur, 1903); H.E. Hemingway, *Final Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Raipur District* (Nagpur, 1972); and P.F. McEldowney.
9. See, for instance, J.W. Chisholm, *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Bilaspore District* (Nagpur, 1869), p. 47. The writings of other administrators have tended to follow Chisholm's chronology. B.L. Pargania states that the 'movement' was founded in 1832. B.L. Pargania, 'The Satnami Movement', *Journal of Social Research*, 10, no. 1 (Ranchi, 1967), p. 1.
10. There have been several forceful reminders about the error of culling out elements for a linear and chronological 'history' from myth. See Juan M. Ossio, 'Myth and History: The Seventeenth Century Chronicle of Guaman Poma de Ayala', in Ravindra K. Jain (ed.), *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1977); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980); and Obeyesekere, *Pattini*.
11. These include records in the Foreign Political Series (National Archives of India, New Delhi), the Nagpur Residency Records, the Bhonsla Vernacular Records, the Nagpur Residency and Secretariat Records (Madhya Pradesh Record Office, Nagpur), and the Board's Collection (India Office Library, London).
12. Agnew; and Jenkins. Agnew was the Superintendent at Chhattisgarh; Jenkins was the Resident at Nagpur.
13. I am summing up the arguments developed at length in my 'Social History of Satnamis of Chhattisgarh', unpublished M.Phil. dissertation (University of Delhi, 1988), pp. 8–21.
14. *Lakhabata* refers to the practice of the periodic redistribution of land. Chhattisgarh is marked by a considerable diversity of soils. The variety of lands within the village used to be constituted into equally valued plots: the village headman had a certain share in each of these blocks and the rest was distributed among the other well-off cultivators within

the village. The institution of lakhabata meant that the blocks of land within the village were periodically redistributed to ensure that members of the village got a share of both poor and good land. It was carried out to accommodate new settlers. The practice also came into play when a village changed hands and a new headman entered the fray. This happened fairly often under *subah* administration. Lakhabata had a specific consequence: it led to the increased marginalization of 'poor and cattleless Ryots', which included a large number of Chamars, whose lands were claimed by well-off cultivators. *Memo on the Connection between Landlord and Tenant in the Chhattisgarh Division*, revenue department file no. 5 (after) 1869 (supplementary index), NRSR, MPRO, Nagpur.

15. We have been reminded that the notion of a division among superordinates is, often, critical for the development of subaltern resistance. See, for instance, Sumit Sarkar, 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation (1905–22)', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984).
16. Agnew, pp. 43–4.
17. I have in mind the work of Rosalind O'Hanlon and Mark Juergensmeyer. The interaction of religion and social vision has been a major theme in these studies. 'The theme has been played out in several variations. A central statement of it is that the lower castes perceive their oppression as stemming from a religious concept, untouchability, as from political circumstances. A major variant on the theme is the lower-caste perception that the fundamental divisions in society are religious.' Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), p. 269. Also see Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (Cambridge, 1985), and for the conduct of resistance in the idiom of religion, David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (Delhi, 1987).
18. See, for instance, Owen M. Lynch, *The Politics of Untouchability* (New York, 1969); Bernard S. Cohn, 'The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste' and 'The Changing Traditions of a Low Caste', *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1987).
19. I wish to thank Kapil Kumar for informing me about the writings on the Satnamis in the Baba Ramchandra Papers, Manuscript Section, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi.
20. I shall discuss the ambiguous and contradictory nature, trajectory, and sequences of the Satnami Mahasabha initiative in a chapter of my forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation.
21. See Kapil Kumar, *Peasants in Revolt: Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh 1886–1922* (Delhi, 1984) and 'The Use of Ramcharitmanas as a Radical Text: Baba Ramchandra in Oudh 1920–50', *Occasional Papers in History and Society No. IV* (NMML, New Delhi); Gyanendra

- Pandey, 'Peasant Revolt in Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh 1919–22', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Essays on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1982); M.H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India: The United Provinces 1918–22* (New Delhi, 1978).
22. The specific term used by Ramchandra was '*poonjipatiyon ki Congress*'—a Congress of capitalists. Equally, it is interesting that the 1925 session of the Congress did not go off well in Ramchandra's perception: his discussions with Jawaharlal Nehru and Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi failed; *kisans* from Bihar and Arjunlal from Ajmer were insulted; finally, there is a reference to *kisans* not being allowed to enter the arena of meetings, which resulted in a battle—'*yudh*'—that ended in a victory for the *kisans*. Baba Ramchandra Papers, First Instalment, III, Speeches and Writings, file no. 2A, Manuscript Section, NMML, New Delhi.
 23. The first substantial part of the *Vanshavalī* is in the files of speeches and writings, file no. 2A; I came across the second part of the *Vanshavalī* in file no. 2B (Loose Papers from Ramchandra's Notebooks). The *Vanshavalī* is incomplete; the last few pages are missing. Baba Ramchandra Papers, First Instalment, Manuscript Section, NMML, New Delhi.
 24. The earliest account of the Satnamis was in the *Report of Ethnological Committee 1866–67*. This was soon followed by Settlement Reports for Bilaspur and Raipur districts. J.W. Chisholm; J.F.K. Hewitt, *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Raepore District* (Nagpur, 1896). The later writings, including Gazetteers, tended to repeat the earlier narratives about the customs of the Satnamis. For other interesting information, see Russell and Hiralal, *The Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces* (London, 1916) and *C.P. Ethnographic Survey*, Draft Articles on Hindustani Caste, First Series (Nagpur, 1914). Census volumes provide supplementary information; see for instance T. Drysdale, *Central Provinces Report on the Census of 1881* (Bombay, 1882); B. Robertson, *Central Provinces Report on the Census of 1891* (Calcutta, 1893). The records of the American Evangelical Mission are interesting for rituals, beliefs, and practices of the Satnamis. I have not used these papers, a number of which are in German. (Records of the American Evangelical Mission, Eden Archives and Library, Webster Groves, Missouri.)
 25. Renato Rosaldo's warning comes to us from his comments on Le Roy Ladurie's use of ethnographic methods in *Montaillou*. I recognize that there is a difference between Fournier's 'inquisitorial voice' and Baba Ramchandra's attempt to write the *Vanshavalī*. Yet there remains Rosaldo's larger point about the historian 'deploying a tactic made familiar by Michel Foucault', whereby 'the narrator invokes the will to truth to suppress the documents' equally present will to power' to liberate the document from the historical context and the politics of domination

that produced it: the 'historian's document is rhetorically treated as if it were the product of a disinterested science'. Renato Rosaldo, 'From the Door of his Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor', in James Clifford and George Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (California, 1986), p. 81.

26. See Juan M. Ossio, 'Myth and History: The Seventeenth Century Chronicle of Guaman Poma de Ayala', in Ravindra Jain (ed.), *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1977).
27. The entire body of Baba Ramchandra's writings on the Satnamis, in fact, had greater polish and were often more didactic than the *Vanshawali*. Santdas (Baba Ramchandra), *Satnam Sagar* (Raipur, 1929).
28. I carried out fieldwork among the Satnamis between November 1989 and April 1990. It is also necessary to point out that Baba Ramchandra had carried away the manuscript of the *Vanshawali* to Awadh; he did not 'gift' the Satnamis with myths which then became a part of their oral tradition.
29. The Satnami mythic tradition is a conceptual entity: it is a historiographical blueprint which helps me to structure Satnami myths and rituals and 'to reconstitute by an operation of logical reconstruction which has nothing to do with an act of empathic projection', the cultural logic of Satnampanth. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 114; on the use of a conceptual entity constructed out of empirical data as a guide for historical analysis, see Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980).
30. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', cited in Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (North Carolina, 1980), p. vii.
31. I borrow the term 'official conceptions' from Gramsci: 'Folklore should instead be studied as a conception of the world and life implicit to a large extent in determinate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition (also for the most part implicit, mechanical or objective) to "official" conceptions of the world (or in a broader sense, the conceptions of the cultured parts of historically determinate societies) . . .' Antonio Gramsci, 'Observations on Folklore: Giovanni Crociconni', *Selections from Cultural Writings* (London, 1985).
32. Anthony Cohen has argued that it is not very helpful to conceive of a community in morphological terms: a community is a symbolic construct: the boundary of the community—its critical defining element—is constituted through symbols. Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London, 1985).
33. Captain Elliot, deputy commissioner, Raipur, had also reported that a plough of four bullocks is called a 'Kutchha Naugar' and forms the

standard on which calculations are made—a plough of eight bullocks is called a 'Pukka Naugar' and double the former also exists but only in name and plough of two bullocks is recognised. From Captain Elliot, deputy commissioner, Raipur, to Major Elliot, commissioner of Nagpur, 29 October 1859. *Existing state of tenures and mode of assessment in Chhattisgarh previous to the year 1233 F*, revenue department, file no. 14 of 1859, MPRO, Nagpur.

34. I would like to make three points about the term *chaitanya swarup*. First, the term literally refers to an enlightened form. Second, in the Hindu textual tradition this enlightened form is seen in opposition to a corporeal physical form; this is obviously not the meaning the term has within the Satnami mythic tradition, since it seems to suggest a particular form of physical being. Third, *chaitanya swarup* may have entered the *Vanshavali* as an imposition of Baba Ramchandra but, situated within the multiple relations of a new context, the category pressed new associations.
35. *Shwet purush* is in literal terms a white person: white suggests the qualities of purity and truth. Evangelical missionaries seized upon this reference to *shwet purush* and argued that Ghasidas had received his inspiration from a white Christian missionary. See, for instance, *Satnampanth Darshak*, Records of American Evangelical Mission, Eden Archives and Library, St Louis, Missouri.
36. The Satnamis make two claims at the same time: they are the original inhabitants of Chhattisgarh; their ancestors had come from the north many hundred years ago.
37. I borrow the category of the barrier from Obeyesekere. Gananath Obeyesekere, *Pattini*, pp. 309–11.
38. The custom among the Satnamis is not to cremate but to bury their dead.
39. Obeyesekere discusses this classic pattern—trials, ordeals, the symbolism of the barrier, and the final incorporation of a deity into an existent pantheon and mythic tradition—in his chapter on 'Mythic Stratigraphy', in *Pattini*.
40. This is also, of course, what distinguishes the Satnami mythic tradition from the classic pattern discussed by Obeyesekere, *Pattini*.
41. Interview with Vijay Guru, Bhopal, June 1985.
42. I am extending an argument of Michael Denning. I also have in mind Roland Barthes: 'To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in "storeys", to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative thread onto an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next, meaning is not "at the end" of the narrative, it runs accross it.' Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class*

Culture in America (London, 1987); Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to Structural Analysis of Narratives', *Image-Music-Text* (New York, 1977), p. 87.

43. Obeyesekere has pointed out the parallel between the symbolism of the barrier in the incorporation of a new deity into a mythic tradition and a rite of initiation. I intend to explore this further. Obeyesekere, *Pattini*, pp. 310–11. On the figure of the 'renouncer', see Louis Dumont, 'World Renunciation in Indian Religion', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 9, 1960.
44. The examples are taken from the *Vanshavalis* and the *C.P. Ethnographic Survey*, Draft Articles on Hindustani Castes, First Series (Nagpur, 1914).
45. See Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*, pp. 8–9 and *passim*.
46. The account of Satnami rituals and practices that follows is based on the writings of colonial administrators and on interviews. I mention the other sources that I have used separately.
47. It was the middle and upper castes—Rauts, Telis, Thakurs, and Brahmins—who could be initiated into Satnampanth. According to a Satnami myth, a large number of Telis—oil pressers—became Satnamis.
48. From Major F.C. Stewart, D.S.P. Raepore, to Captain H. Ingard, deputy commissioner, Raepore, July 1870, no. 962 of 1870, General Department Compilation, no. 412 of 1872, *Famine of 1868–69*, MPRO, Nagpur.
49. See, for instance, Lawrence Babb, *The Divine Hierarchy* (Columbia, 1975), and Edward Harper, 'Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste and Religion', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXIII, June 1964.
50. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (London, 1970).
51. Michael Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus* (Princeton, 1979).
52. At the same time, as I shall argue, the construct of a culturally and ritually significant dominant caste was another defining axis of the hegemonic symbolic order. Equally, the symbols, signs, and metaphors of colonial power also constituted a dominant and hegemonic presence in the cultural world of Chhattisgarh.
53. See Andrew Turton, 'Limits of Ideological Domination and the Formation of Social Consciousness', *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 13, 1984; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1984) and 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980); E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', *Social History*, vol. 3, no. 2, May 1978.
54. For the notion of differential appropriation of symbols within popular culture, see Roger Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural

- Uses in Early Modern France', in Steven Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture* (Mouton, 1988).
55. Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 122.
 56. See, for instance, Edward Harper, 'Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XXIII, June 1964; and, particularly, Lawrence Babb, *Divine Hierarchy*.
 57. For a description of the organizational hierarchy within Satnampanth, see K.C. Dubey, *Kosa: A Village Survey*, Census of India 1961, vol. VIII, Madhya Pradesh, part VI, Village Survey Monographs No. 9. For a description of the satnami rite of initiation, *Satlok*, which cannot, however, be counted on for accuracy, see the account of *tahsildar* Durga Prasad Pandey, cited in Rusell and Hiralal, *Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces of India* (London, 1916).
 58. On the Kabirpanth in Chhattisgarh, see *C.P. Ethnographic Survey*, XVII, Draft Articles on Hindustani Castes, 1st Series (Nagpur, 1914), pp. 25–39.
 59. Colonial administrators made a great deal of this continuity since it helped them situate Satnampanth within a linear history of religion. The connections could, of course, have existed, but, given the paucity of sources, are difficult to establish. Moreover, there could also have been links between the Satnamis of Chhattisgarh and the Satnami movement of north India described by Irfan Habib in *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (London, 1963), pp. 338–9, 342–4.
 60. To the extent that there is a universality about such a process of symbolic construction, Satnampanth constituted a 'bricolage'. This concept of Levi-Strauss has been deployed by historians and anthropologists to describe processes of symbolic construction in varied historical contexts. See, Claude Lévi Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, 1966); Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago, 1985); David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 90–1; Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kalki Avatar of Bisrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1989), p. 48.
 61. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977); Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance*.
 62. For another discussion of the place of the body within the caste system, see Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste as Subaltern Consciousness', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 203–6.
 63. I am, of course, reiterating my argument about the dual logic of the limits of, and the limits set by, the hegemonic symbolic order of the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution. Jean Comaroff has discussed similar issues in the context of Tshidi Zionist cult practice in *Body of Power*.

64. See Obeyesekere, *Pattini*, pp. 292–3.
65. The *Vanshavalī* does not tell us anything more about the moneylender or the Gond raja.
66. The other two sacred dates, according to the *Vanshavalī*, were *Bhad Aathon* and *Dashehra*.
67. Ranajit Guha has discussed modes of transport as symbols of upper-caste domination and their appropriation as an act of inversion. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), pp. 66–8.
68. Kapil Kumar has discussed how Baba Ramchandra himself addressed peasant meetings sitting on a cot tied up high between the branches of trees: the incident of Ghasidas perched on a tree could, then, have been an addition made either by Ramchandra or his Satnami informants after hearing about it from him. At the same time, the fact of Ghasidas' darshan, of the transmission of his authority through sight, has an important place within the myths of Satnampanth. Kapil Kumar, *Peasants in Revolt: Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh, 1886–1922* (Delhi, 1984), pp. 89–90.
69. The place of darshan of a guru, a two-way process that constitutes a spectacle, occupies a central place within the Bhakti and Sant traditions. For an interesting recent discussion of the transmission of a guru's authority through sight, see Lawrence Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 78–9.
70. An encounter between different conceptions and notations of time is a critical event: delay can be used as a subaltern mode of resistance against the regimentation of time and work discipline. See, for instance, Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (North Carolina, 1980); E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38, 1967.
71. On writing as a form of power in the colonial context, see, for instance, Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects* (Delhi, 1983); and Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power*.
72. Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization does not require introduction. M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford, 1962); *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966). For an extension of the concept to Satnamis, see P.F. McEldowney, pp. 499–500.
73. The concept of Sanskritization has been used, debated, and criticized endlessly over the years. David Hardiman has engaged with and provided an effective recent critique of the category. My criticisms of the concept take up and carry forward Hardiman's arguments: 'Sanskritization' underestimates conflict generated by the appropriation of upper-caste symbols by low castes; the theory lacks a convincing historical dimension;

and the way out of the impasse does lie in relating values to power. At the same time, my emphasis on the ritual hierarchy of purity and pollution as a defining axis of the hegemonic symbolic order also stresses that such appropriation of upper-caste symbols tends to reproduce the significance of dominant meanings and functions within hegemonic limits. David Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 157–65.

74. See Veena Das, 'Subaltern as Perspective', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 318–19.
75. The long-drawn-out conflict between the upper castes and Satnamis over the issue of the sacred thread was an important aspect of the late nineteenth century in Chhattisgarh. We are lucky that we have a mythic representation of the conflict: official sources tell us little about it.
76. See Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987); 'The Original Caste: Power, History and Hierarchy in South Asia', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 1, January–June 1989, p. 61; Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual Presentation and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago, 1988); 'Centrality, Mutuality and Hierarchy: Shifting Aspects of Inter-caste relationships in North India', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 1, January–June 1989, p. 8.
77. Interview with Kanhaiyalal Kosariya, Bhopal, 3–4 June 1987.
78. The gold ornaments and chair were, of course, signifiers of rank within the social order. I think this ties up with my argument about the importance of a culturally and ritually significant dominant caste as an axis of the hegemonic symbolic order.
79. My enquiries in the field have revealed that Balakdas too came back to this world; the person who had asked for his last rites to be performed was his younger brother and heir to the seat of the guru, Agardas. This is, in fact, a recurring pattern for the first three generations of Satnami gurus.

Popular Religion and Social Mobility in Colonial Bengal

The Matua Sect and the Namasudras*

SEKHAR BANDYOPADHYAY

‘Hitherto popular culture had been defined by a process of exclusion’, writes David Hall in his ‘Introduction’ to *Understanding Popular Culture*.¹ Through this exclusionist methodology, as it appears, popular religion came to be regarded as the ‘other’ religion, defined in contradistinction to what was known as the established religion of the elites, which incorporated a classical tradition. This ascription of a residual character to popular religion is the result of an unconscious acceptance of the contemporary elitist stereotyping of certain sets of beliefs and rituals as ‘popular’, or not conforming to the religious and moral norms of the elites. Such ‘popular’ religion is believed to be something which the elites of society did not subscribe to or discarded as being too plebeian or typical of the subordinate classes. This leads to the conception of popular religion in an oppositional form: it is regarded as a religion which developed from among the people and which was constructed in resistance to the ideology of the elites. Such definitions, which assign an independent

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identity to popular religion, thus also assume its disjunction from the religion of the elites, discounting possibilities of interaction and mutual interchange of ideas between the two streams. This assumption of an autonomy of popular religion does not however stand the test of scrutiny.

In its 'wider sense', popular religion 'means quite simply the religion of the vast mass of people; popular in the sense of "widely favoured"', and it incorporates also its 'narrower usage', i.e. religion as an 'oppositional form'.² And if we look at popular religion from this perspective, we may often find that much of the popular religious beliefs and practices were actually rooted in or derived from what may be described as the religion of the establishment. In a hierarchical society the upper orders extended their hegemony over the rest of the society by prescribing certain moral-ideological standards, which set the limits for imagination of the masses. The latter began to conform, sometimes consciously (though helplessly) and sometimes unknowingly, to those standards, and often internalized them as their own. And therefore we often come across situations which can lead us to doubt the distinction between 'elite' and 'popular' cultures or religions. Although this shaping of popular culture was essentially of an unequal nature and had a class dimension, it was also a two-way process, as the classical religion absorbed elements from folk religions and became 'folklorised'.³

But, we cannot take it for granted that popular religion was always, and in all its aspects, conformist in nature. As some historians of popular religion have argued, the people were not always the passive receivers of values of their social superiors; they also adapted or redefined these in their own ways.⁴ Through this process of creative appropriation,⁵ popular religion developed its subversive edge. It began to question the ideologies of the hegemonic religious order and preached inversion of the social hierarchy which the latter had legitimized. Popular religion in this way reflected the social protest of the subordinate classes against their social superiors and their ideologies of domination. But this subversion or inversion was transitory and these moments of protest only set the normality into sharper focus. Religion, in other words, had for the people certain functional and emotional utilities. It helped them absorb the shocks and tensions of life, in certain cases also define and assert their self-image, and in

so doing provided them with an ideology of protest. But as this self-image was usually defined within the overall context of the established social milieu, the protest itself became ultimately coopted into the hegemonic order. And it was religion again which legitimized and smoothened this process of accommodation and absorption.

Popular religion, to borrow an expression, was 'at the same time both acculturated and acculturating'; it was neither radically different from the religion of the elites, nor could it be completely moulded by it. It was 'a mixture, whose constituent elements', derived from both folk and classical traditions, 'weld together indissolubly'.⁶ The present essay seeks to bring out this complex interaction by analysing the beliefs, rituals, and symbols of the Matua sect which had developed in the late nineteenth century to meet certain social needs of an upwardly mobile peasant community called the Namasudras.

In eastern Bengal, the community had constructed in course of the nineteenth century a new self-image or indeed a new collective 'self', which it had to affirm. This act of self-affirmation both necessitated a subversion of the hegemonic ritual order, as well as accommodation within that system so that the new self-image might be legitimized. The cult was so conceptualized that it could adequately meet both these functional and emotional needs of the community and it therefore became the main focus of their social movement. It also became a major instrument of social mobilization, systematically used to reinforce the collective identity and to draw the social boundaries in sharper lines. But along with this adherence to the tenets of the cult, the Namasudras also participated in a wider range of rituals, rites, and ceremonies that were directly within the constituted order of organized Hinduism. This signified their co-option by the hegemonic social order, which their initial social protest was directed against.

The political behaviour of the Namasudras also followed the same trajectory, largely as a consequence of this socio-religious movement. Initially alienated from the nationalist movement, which was thought to be serving only the interests of a dominating high-caste gentry leadership, they gradually moved towards integration into the larger political nation. Their movement for social regeneration had elevated them by the end of the 1930s to a position of power within the institutionalized politics of Bengal, compelling the Congress, which represented the mainstream nationalism in the province, to recognize

this new organized power base. Integration, with an appropriate share of political power, appears to have been the ultimate objective of their leaders, as that alone would legitimize their new respectable self-image, which had been conceptualized not in isolation, but in relation to the other components of what was then the political nation. The organizational network of the Matua sect, by mobilizing mass support in favour of this manoeuvre, helped the leaders of the community to achieve their political goal.

II

The Namasudras, who were earlier known as the 'Chandals' of Bengal, lived mainly in the six eastern districts of the province, i.e. Bakarganj, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore, and Khulna, which contained in 1901, 75.18 per cent of this caste group of 1,852,371. Numerically, they constituted the second largest caste group among the Hindus of Bengal, and the largest in its eastern parts. Within eastern Bengal again, their major concentration (about half of the Namasudra population of Bengal) was in the low-lying *bil* or marshy tracts of north-west Bakarganj, south Faridpur and the adjoining Narail and Magura subdivisions of Jessore, and the Sadar and Bagerhat subdivisions of Khulna.⁷ In the early-twentieth-century *jatimala* literature the Chandals were portrayed as the 'non-Aryan autochthonous people of the land'. This theory might have been derived from the late-nineteenth-century writings of the colonial ethnographers such as James Wise or Herbert Risley, who believed that the geographical location of the community strongly indicated that they were originally a 'Dravidian tribe' which had come into contact with the Aryans at a comparatively late age. They were gradually incorporated into the fold of Hinduism and later hardened into a caste. But this Hinduization had possibly taken place when the caste system had already assumed its fully developed shape and the outsiders were being taken in reluctantly and only at the bottom. But this entry into the Hindu fold was in itself a case of upward social mobility, as this placed the community above 'the other non-Aryans like the Bagdi, Dom, Hadi etc.', who, according to the author of *Bangiya Jatimala*, were denied this access into Hindu society till the early decades of the twentieth century.⁸

The Chandal origin of the Namasudra community also explains

its social status among the Hindus of Bengal. The Chandals were untouchables according to *Manusmriti* and *Vyasa samhita*.⁹ But the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇam* and the *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇam*, the two thirteenth-fourteenth century texts, refer to these Chandals as *antyaja* or a low born mixed caste or *sankarajati*, and do not give any firm indication that they were strictly held to be untouchables.¹⁰ Even Raghunandan, who is regarded as the most conservative *smṛitikara* of sixteenth-century Bengal, speaks of restrictions on connubial and commensal relations with the Chandals, but does not insist that their touch be avoided by all means.¹¹ The literary evidence of the *Mangalakavyas* of the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries also suggests that the Chandals lived within the precincts of the town (*Chandala nibase pure*),¹² and were not regarded as *antebasi* (dwellers on the periphery) as indicated by Manu. Enquiries in the early twentieth century also revealed that the so-called untouchables suffered less in Bengal than their counterparts in other regions of India.¹³ The Namasudras, in other words, even if they were the inheritors of the social status of the earlier Chandals, were certainly not the 'untouchables' or *Panchama*.¹⁴ Nor were they the lowest of the low in Bengali Hindu society. In certain eastern districts like Faridpur, Dacca, or Jessore, they were ranked in popular esteem at the middle of the hierarchy of the *sankarajatis*; in other districts also they were placed above the actual untouchable menial castes of Bengal, such as Teor, Bagdi, Muchi, Dom, Hadi, Bhuimali, etc.¹⁵ But despite this, the Namasudras were subjected to various forms of social disregard, which created a considerable social distance between them and the privileged high-caste Hindu *bhadralok*. The latter, though they did not actually practise untouchability, often verbally invoked the notion in order to affirm their social authority.¹⁶ And the proliferation of *jatimala* literature in the early twentieth century gave fresh currency to the dicta of *Manusmriti*, as the lower-caste assertiveness was threatening the social harmony which it had once sanctified.¹⁷

The low social status of the Namasudras also coincided with their subordinate class position. But in course of the nineteenth century the community underwent such a radical transformation that it almost completely changed its own self-perception. In the low-lying *bil* areas of eastern Bengal, which were almost submerged for more than six months in a year, the Namasudras used to maintain an amphibious existence, earning their livelihood through boating

and fishing.¹⁸ But the rapid reclamation of these marshy wastes in course of the nineteenth century provided these hardy people with an opportunity to improve their lot as pioneer cultivators. As the frontier of cultivation expanded in eastern Bengal, the Namasudras emerged as a settled peasant community, 78 per cent of the actual earners among them being dependent on agriculture. Of this peasant population, only a small fraction, 1.15 per cent in 1911, were in the rent-receiving category, while the rest were either 'rent payers', i.e. *ryot* with or without occupancy right, or 'field labourers', and 'farm servants'. The latter tilled the soil as sharecroppers or agricultural workers, whose numbers were increasing and whose plight was getting worse towards the 1920s. But the more important fact that requires to be underscored is that landholding in this region was monopolized by the high-caste Hindus and the Sayyid Muslims. In the Dacca, Rajshahi and Chittagong divisions, where the Namasudras mainly lived, 80.82 per cent of the 'rent receivers' belonged to these social categories, while only 3.78 per cent of them were Namasudras. Thus the most fundamental dichotomy in Bengal's agrarian relations, i.e. between the 'rent receivers' and the 'rent payers', coincided with the caste hierarchy. And this division was further accentuated by various forms of oppression, such as subinfeudation, exaction of illegal cesses, non-fixity of rent, and replacement of easy cash rents with heavy produce rents. However, the available evidence also suggests that there was differentiation even within the community, as a small group had moved up the social ladder by taking advantage of the process of reclamation that had been going on in the area since the early nineteenth century. Some of them had also taken to moneylending and trade, and later to education and professions. But a very rough calculation based on census occupation data suggests that this upwardly mobile group constituted even less than 2 per cent of the Namasudra population in 1911.¹⁹

The situation therefore suggests that the vertical divisions within the community were not sharp enough as yet to destroy its internal cohesion or cause a rift in a commonly shared sense of group identity. The peasantry had already been alienated from the hegemonic high-caste gentry, who oppressed them both in the social and economic spheres of life. The upwardly mobile section, on the other hand, was numerically so small and economically so weak, with such a

low ritual rank, that it could not identify itself with the high-caste *bhadralok*. Their newly-acquired secular social status made them more conscious of their paradoxical social position, especially the anomaly involved in their performing roles higher than their traditional caste occupation. By the late nineteenth century, the Namasudras, through a commonly shared physical experience of constantly encountering a hostile nature in the vast marshy or forest tracts of east Bengal,²⁰ had emerged as a settled peasant community, with an up-and-pushing group to provide it with the necessary leadership. They had by now constructed a collective self-image which was radically different from that of the boating or fishing Chandals, living at the periphery of human settlements.

It is at this juncture that the transition from Chandal to Namasudra identity took place, though it is difficult either to determine the exact meaning of the new term,²¹ or to specify the date when the new name actually began to take off. The first organized meeting of the community for their social upliftment was held in 1881 in village Dattadanga of Mollarhat subdivision of Khulna district.²² It was possibly around this time that the new name began to gain currency. James Wise, whose ethnological account of eastern Bengal was published in 1883, found this name in social use.²³ The circular which Risley had issued in 1886, for the guidance of the local informants supplying data for his ethnological survey of Bengal, also referred to the community as 'Chandal or Namasudra'.²⁴ The same expression was later incorporated for the first time into the census report of 1891, indicating wider popular acceptance of the new name. By 1900 it seems to have gained further social recognition and, as local officials reported from eastern Bengal, the members of the community would now strongly 'object to being called Chandals'.²⁵ The Namasudra identity of the community by now seems to have taken firm roots in the collective consciousness of its members.

The essence of this new collective consciousness of the Namasudras was an ever-growing sense of self-esteem and what contributed to its development was, apart from the physical environment, their contact in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a number of libertarian social influences. The first major influence that they were exposed to was that of Islam. Its egalitarian social philosophy had lured many of them into its fold. Although it is difficult to quantify

the rate of conversion in Bengal, according to an early-twentieth-century Hindu speculation, nearly half of its lower-caste population had embraced Islam during the two and a half centuries of its existence in this region.²⁶ Later, in the nineteenth century, it was replaced by Christianity as the major proselytizing faith, because in all the Namasudra populated areas missionaries of various denominations were most active. What was important, however, was not the conversions that took place, but the spirit of self-respect that such influences instilled in the Namasudras. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, the Namasudra collective identity had taken a firm shape and they were no longer interested in conversion. Therefore, the Australian Baptist missionary, Dr C.S. Mead, who was most active among the Namasudras of Faridpur, noted in despair that they had only learnt to 'lift up their heads', but refused to 'bow their heads in living and lowly homage at His pierced feet'.²⁷

What had further inspired the Namasudras was the influence of the medieval *bhakti* movement, particularly its more non-formal and egalitarian rural variants. The movement had been started in Bengal by Sri Chaitanya and his disciples, whose avowed goal was the social and spiritual salvation of the downtrodden. But Vaishnavism could not ultimately escape the influence of the 'great Sanskrit theological and philosophical tradition'. In order to be accepted as authentic, the teachings of Sri Chaitanya had to be related to the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions. This task of 'tying' Bengal Vaishnavism 'into the orthodox traditions of Indian religion' was accomplished by the *sada* or six Goswamins of Vrindavan.²⁸ But as the disciples of Sri Chaitanya were organized into a sect in Bengal, known as the Gaudiya Vaishnava Sampraday, it developed a syncretism that drew together the earlier liberal trends as well as the later Smarta-Puranic canonical orthodoxy, and it brought in also the Sahajiya tradition which enjoyed a tremendous influence on the lower orders of the society. Thus Gaudiya Vaishnavism gradually turned into an institution through which lower-caste people developed a new sense of self-respect and also began to assert it in larger social spheres.²⁹ But as Chaitanya himself had left the caste question open, 'at least in the social sense', his later followers, in the absence of any consistent model to follow, also took various positions. While Nityananda and his followers, many of whom had Sahajiya leanings, continued to assist the lower

castes and the untouchables, the more orthodox section, led by the Shantipuri Brahman, Advaita Acharya and his followers, refused to admit such elements into their sect.³⁰ Gradually, this orthodox trend became dominant, as the Brahman gurus, scared by the threat to their authority posed by the ever-increasing number of lower-caste converts, began to introduce caste rules and codes of differentiation. The Brahman devotees were allowed to enjoy all sorts of ritualistic privileges, while the untouchables were despised as Jat Vaishnava.³¹ The sect's previous image of protest and irreverence was submerged in established orthodoxy and uninhibited appropriation of symbols of order, discretion, and domination. An early-twentieth-century oral tradition from the Bengal countryside bears ample testimony to this new aristocratic spirit of differentiation among the Vaishnavas:

*Neda nedi sabai bujhi? Emni matibhram,
Vaishnavero uchunichu achhe bhedkram.*³²

They are all tonsured males and females, you think? That is an error; distinctions between high and low exist among the Vaishnavas too.

As organized Vaishnavism developed its image of a 'neo-Brahman order', promoting 'social cohesion' rather than 'social revolution',³³ the more radical Sahajiya tradition which, true to its Tantrik heritage, had repudiated the caste system,³⁴ began to grow in popularity. Together with this, there developed a number of 'deviant' sects, mostly under non-Brahman gurus, who disavowed all established norms of caste distinction and deference. These Sudra gurus, who had no formal link with the orthodox Gaudiya Vaishnava order, began to attract thousands of lower-caste devotees who flocked to them in search of social emancipation.³⁵ When in the late nineteenth century Risley found the majority of the Namasudras 'profess[ing] the tenets of the Vaishnava sect of Hindus',³⁶ it was actually the various deviant sects that they belonged to, e.g. the Kartabhaja, a deistical sect which repudiated idolatry and caste and established remarkable influence over the Namasudras living in the swamp areas of Faridpur and north-west Bakarganj.³⁷ Another sect which also appears to have attracted these people in the Bikrampur region was the Kishori Bhajan Sampraday which, initiated by a man called Kalachand Vidyalankar, made no distinction between castes.³⁸

Another major influence on the Namasudras was that of the sect which had developed around Shahlal Pir. Born sometime around 1700 in rural east Bengal, Shahlal had gathered around him both Muslim and numerous Hindu disciples. The majority of the latter were Namasudras, drawn from the villages of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, etc. After his death in c. 1805, the sect developed further under his three sons. What the Pir had preached was a simple gospel of personal devotion (*bhakti*) and spiritual emotionalism (*bhava*) and the disciples were admitted into the sect through a simple ritual of initiation. This insistence on initiation appears to be in itself an attempt to undermine the significance of birth, which was of utmost importance in organized Hinduism. The hierarchy of castes was further challenged by the acceptance of the primacy of the guru or *murshid* by the disciples. The guru was to be the centre of their devotion and he would act as the intermediary between them and their God. This devotion had to be unconditional, as everyone, the Hindu disciples included, had to visit the Pir's *darga*, accept his *sinni* and drink water touched by his feet. In this way, as a *murshida* song indicated, the disciples had to renounce their pride of caste and lineage ('*tor bazare aisyaare amar gelo jati kulre*'), in order to propitiate the guru to attain divine joy. As the modern chronicler of the sect describes them, the *murshida* songs, which are sung even today among the Namasudras of eastern Bengal, are those which sang of the glory of humanity.³⁹ Their dictum '*murshid satya*' (truth is the preceptor) was later adopted by another sect known as the Darbesh Sai Sampraday, which was formed in the Dacca region in the mid-nineteenth century by a man called Udaychand Karmakar. All these local heretical sects had a profound influence on the Namasudras. But as these sects sought to obliterate social distinctions of caste, they were stereotyped as plebeian. Their rituals and philosophical constructions were thought to be 'totally antithetical to Gaudiya Vaishnava dharma.'⁴⁰ To this genre belonged the Matua sect, and by the turn of the century most of the Namasudras of east Bengal were the members of this order.

III

Multiple factors in the nineteenth century had contributed to the evolution of a new collective identity among the Namasudras and they

now sought to assert it by breaking down the barriers of deference, which meant implicitly an attempt to subvert the hegemonic ritual order. Their first organized endeavour at self-affirmation came in 1872 in the Faridpur-Bakarganj region.⁴¹ It was, in the words of the Faridur District Superintendent of Police, 'an effort . . . to raise themselves in the social scale among the Hindus.'⁴² The occasion was the *shradh* ceremony of the father of a well-to-do Namasudra headman of village Amgram in Bakarganj district. Violating established norms of commensality, he invited his higher-caste neighbours to attend the ceremony and dine in his house; but the latter, at the instigation of the Kayasthas, refused to accept his invitation. This sparked off a social boycott movement, as the Namasudras over a wide region, covering south Faridpur, north-west Bakarganj and the adjoining areas of Jessore, immediately resolved not to work under the higher castes who denied them social respect. So effective was the movement that about four months after its commencement the District Magistrate of Faridpur found the fields untilled, the houses unthatched and not a single Namasudra in the service of the Hindus, and interestingly also of the Muslims, of the region. Extra police had to be mobilized from the district headquarters to maintain peace and order. But the movement soon died down, as the poorer Namasudras found it difficult to sustain themselves without work. And in this way their first attempt to restructure the power relations in society ended in a failure.

This initial setback impressed upon the Namasudras the necessity of a more effective social organization that would both bind them together and give them the self-confidence to assert themselves as a unified group against the hegemonic elites of the local Hindu society. This emotional need of the community explains the growing popularity of the Matua sect, which emerged and spread among the Namasudras of Faridpur almost around the same time. The sect was formed by a man called Harichand, who was born in a Chandal or Namasudra family in 1811/1812 in a village called Safaladanga in the Gopalganj subdivision of Faridpur district.⁴³ He and his family had been Vaishnavites for generations. His grandfather Mochanram was a devout Vaishnava and was known in his locality as Thakur Mochanram. Mochanram's eldest son Jasomanta was a Vaishnava devotee as well, and he inherited the title of 'Thakur'. He was a man of modest means, with two or three milch cows, and the milk

products which he personally sold in the market, added to his income. His son Harichand was evicted from his ancestral village through the machinations of the zamindar and had to settle ultimately in Orakandi village, where he took to cultivation and small trade for a living. But already known as a religious person endowed with magical healing powers, he soon began to attract disciples from his own village as well as from the neighbouring villages of Ghritakandi, Machkandi, Kumaria, Chandradwip, and Orakandi. As his gathering increased, one day he experienced *atma darshan* or self-revelation, through which he realized that he was the incarnation of God himself, born in this world to bring salvation to the downtrodden. Immediately after this he started organizing his own sect on the basis of a simple non-ritualistic doctrine of *bhakti*: 'all rituals, except devotion to God, faith in mankind, and love for living creatures, are distortions.'⁴⁴ The simple dictum had an obvious appeal for the lower orders of the society. More and more of them flocked around him. Gripped by emotion, they sang collectively the enchanted name of 'Hari' or Lord Krishna. This had obvious implications for the existing hierarchy in local society. People began to believe that Harichand was gifted with supernatural power, not only to cure a disease, to give life to the dead or to tame a tiger, but to punish the social offenders as well: he could overthrow an oppressive Brahman landlord or curse a cruel *naib* with leprosy.⁴⁵ But, as the sect tended to subvert the hegemonic order, the upholders tried to deter them, at first by means of physical coercion (with the help of the zamindar), and then by resorting to social boycott. The upper-caste Hindus and the respectable Vaishnavas refused to have any social interaction with the followers of the sect. Yet another tactic of the opponents was to ridicule them as *moto* or people drunk with their own spiritual outpourings (*matoyara*). In order to vindicate the image of his sect, Harichand turned the ridiculous epithet into the new name of his followers, and he started calling them 'Matua'. The word, however, had no definite dictionary meaning.⁴⁶

The sect gradually grew in size as it became the rallying point for the members of the untouchable and lower castes of the region, the Namasudras, of course, constituting an overwhelming majority of them.⁴⁷ Harichand died in 1878, but the sect expanded further under his son Guruchand Thakur (b. 1846).⁴⁸ The latter formalized the doctrines of the sect to suit the needs of an emerging lower-caste

peasant community. Though claims were put forth that it was a 'new' religion,⁴⁹ its philosophical notions, its general view of life and society, and its cosmology were constructed through a selective absorption and/or inversion of ideas and symbols from traditional orthodox Hinduism and the Bhakti tradition, incorporating both the canonical and Sahajiya variants of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. But the sect would not have been so popular had it not posed a challenge to the hegemonic ritual order and sought to negate its ideology of hierarchy. Harichand was portrayed as the person who had destroyed the pride of the Kshatriya and brought the Brahman and the Chandal together on a platform of equality.⁵⁰ His son Guruchand also visualized a society where there would be no differentiation among human beings ('*manushe manushe balo•bhinno jati kotha*'); particularly among the members of the Matua sect there was to be no division of caste ('*matua sakale ek jatibhed nai*').⁵¹ Food and water could be had from the hands of any individual who had a 'pure character', as no other social distinction was recognized. Since the human body was the abode of the Supreme God, there could be no reason why it should be regarded as impure or untouchable.⁵² This humanitarian faith impelled the disciples of Harichand to abolish all distinctions amongst themselves ('*Harichander anuchar hayechhe nana varna ekanna*').⁵³ Even gender distinctions were done away with, as women were accepted as social equals and were granted equal rights in the congregational life of the sect.⁵⁴ And though initially focused on a single community (i.e. the Namasudras), it gradually attracted members from other sections of the society including, as it appears from a devotional song, some of the upper castes as well:

*Brahman Chandal Tanti Jola Muchi Hadi jatigo
Sab milechhe balchhe Hari go.*⁵⁵

Brahman, Chandal, Tanti, Jola, Muchi, Hadi castes have all united and are chanting the name of Hari.

Guruchand believed that though born in a Namasudra family, he could not deliver his own community unless he worked for the salvation of all other social groups, especially the depressed and the untouchable.⁵⁶ This gradually developed into a universalist approach, which indicates his awareness of the outer world and of the new

humanism popularized by the Bengal Renaissance. Guruchand, as his biographer tells us, had once told the wife of an Australian Baptist missionary:

*Narakare bhoomandale jatajan achhe,
Ekjati bole manya pabe mor kachhe.*⁵⁷

All human beings living in this world will be considered by me as belonging to one race.

Nothing could be more expressive of the universal egalitarianism of the Matuas. It was this humanistic approach of the sect that made it so popular among the lower orders of the society. Yet, in reality, this universalism does not appear to have been pushed very far and the sect, despite big claims, remained more or less coterminous with the Namasudra community. But this, on the other hand, gave the sect more homogeneity which the other religious orders lacked.

Another reason why the depressed Namasudra community felt attracted to this sect was that it challenged openly the hegemony of the Brahmans, who were the pivot of the local power structure. One of the methods of perpetuating this hegemony was *gurubad*. The guru enjoyed total control over the spiritual life of his disciples by acting as the intermediary between them and God. The position of the guru was the prerogative of the Brahmans, as they enjoyed a monopoly over scriptural knowledge and an exclusive right to perform Vedic rites. The Brahman guru therefore came to be looked upon as the only person who could initiate (known as *diksha*) others into the path of spiritual salvation. As a Brahman commentator put it in the early twentieth century:

*Guruh pita gururnata gururdeva gururgatih,
Sive rushte gurustrata gurou rushte na kaschana.*⁵⁸

Guru is father, mother and God and the only person to be followed. If Siva is angry, the guru can protect, but if the guru is angry nobody can.

The concept, in other words, required a total subjection of the disciples to their guru and this concept was incorporated into the orthodox Vaishnava theology. As Sanatana Goswami says in his *Haribhaktibilasha*: 'Pay obeisance to your guru and surrender everything at his feet and after being initiated by him in a proper

way, learn from him the sacred Vaishnava mantra.⁵⁹ It was again the same text which stressed that the Brahman gurus should enjoy the most exalted position within the Vaishnava order. Therefore, when the Sudra gurus began to initiate their disciples, it was considered as a deviation and they came to form what are known as 'deviant' orders. The supremacy of the guru was further emphasized in the other *bhakti* texts, which gradually began to make a distinction between the Sravanaguru or Sikshaguru, i.e. preceptors who preached or taught *bhakti*, and the Dikshaguru who initiated the disciples into the path of devotion by giving them the sacred mantra or 'syllable'. As time passed, the Dikshaguru assumed the status of God and the 'intermediacy of the guru became an essential concept of *bhakti*.'⁶⁰

Both Harichand and his son Guruchand of the Matua sect repudiated this essentialism of intermediacy. Harichand had insisted that there was no need for initiation, nor even for pilgrimage ('*diksha nai karibena teertha parjatan*') and the only means to achieve salvation was through simple devotion and love for God ('*Hariprem plabanete jib mukti pabe*'), for which no mediation of any businessman-like guru ('*Gururupe byabasayi*') was necessary.⁶¹ Guruchand also thought that although the guru chanted the sacred mantra into the ear of the disciple, all other mantras except the name of God or Harinam were meaningless ('*dikshamantra dey guru karne mukh rakhi/Harinam mantra bina sab mantra phanki*'),⁶² and to learn this supreme syllable or *mahamantra*, no initiation or dispensation was necessary ('*diksha-siksha kono kichhu nahi prayojan/Harinam mahamantra jano sarbajan*').⁶³ But though the role of the Brahman Dikshaguru was denounced, both Harichand and Guruchand themselves gradually assumed among the devotees of the Matua sect, the status of Sravanaguru or Sikshaguru. This development, amounting almost to their deification, becomes evident from a number of the later devotional songs of the sect.⁶⁴

The Matua sect did not, however, advocate idolatry and ritualistic Hindu practices and condemned them as instruments of Brahman domination. The deities of the Hindu pantheon, Guruchand believed, were the creation of the scriptures written by the Brahmans and the sole purpose of those scriptures was to establish the supremacy of the Brahmans in society. To save the masses from the evils of priestcraft, Guruchand denounced all rituals as puzzling mumbo-jumbo ('*tantra-mantra-bhelki-bhoj*?'),⁶⁵ which the Brahmans had devised to deny the people an understanding of the real meaning of religion. He wanted,

as we learn from his biographer, a simple religion that would provide guidance to the common people for living a meaningful life ('*Je dharma sahaj pathel/Chalay jiban pathel/Sei dharma sarbajana gamya*').⁶⁶ The devotees of the Matua order did not worship any gods or goddesses ('*Matua jibane tai debdebi keho nai*'). Their only deity was He who lived in the hearts of men ('*manusher majhe tar praner thakur*') and their mantra the love that linked the devotee to the deity ('*niti niti tana tani chale prane prane*').⁶⁷ If there was at all any prescribed ritual for the Matua sect, it was to pay regular obeisance at the altar of Lord Hari, and to sing collectively the songs of devotion or *kirtan* to attain the mystical joy that would lead them to their salvation.⁶⁸ However, as the sect developed, the Lord Hari, and Hari the first preceptor, became virtually identical in the songs composed by the later devotees, and subsequently Guruchand was also elevated to the status of a deity.⁶⁹ This was not perhaps unexpected, as popular devotion often requires some concrete manifestation of divinity as its object.

The *kirtan* was an essential feature of Matua religious life and it performed several important social functions. As it was sung collectively, it gave the sect a congregational character and helped its predominantly Namasudra devotees to construct and continually reinforce their collective identity through a shared experience of devotion. This form of congregational singing had a long tradition in Bengal, as an authority on this socio-religious phenomenon tells us.⁷⁰ It had existed even before Sri Chaitanya had popularized it in the sixteenth century, though in the post-Chaitanya period it became much more widely practised. As people high and low gathered in assemblies, they sang and danced together, and all social distinctions were forgotten. The *kirtan*, in other words, had a great levelling effect and was not therefore liked by the orthodox custodians of social hierarchy. It also fostered among the participants a sense of co-operation and camaraderie, and thus gave them a sense of self-confidence. At times of calamity, people in the Bengal countryside frequently resorted to this practice of singing *kirtan*, as it gave them the courage to face difficult times and to do so collectively. It was likewise for the Namasudra devotees of the Matua sect. The songs (*namgan*, as they were popularly called) emphasized, first of all, the power of the gurus, both Harichand and Guruchand, who could help their disciples to overcome all the crises of their lives. The gurus could expel the fear

of the king and ward off all hazards ('*rajbhay nasila bighna binasila*');⁷¹ they could give solace to all sorrows ('*duhkha nibaran*') and give life to the dead ('*maradehe pran dile bhagaban*');⁷² by propitiating Guruchand the hungry could get food and the childless could get a son ('*annahine pabi anna, putrahine putra pabi*');⁷³ by the grace of Harichand, the lame could dance, the blind could see and the dumb could sing the songs of Hari ('*Namer gune khanje nache duti bahu tule/Bobay bale balo haribol andhe chay nayan mele*');⁷⁴ the sheer magic of Harinam cured all diseases of mind and body ('*Hariname sarbbabyaahi hare*').⁷⁵ The songs in this way sought to generate self-confidence in the minds of those who were otherwise weak and ill-equipped to face these hazards and obstacles. It was *namgan* which also gave them courage and self-respect and the strength to stand up to the powerful adversaries who held them down in society. The congregational singing of *namgan* was, for the Namasudra devotees of the Matua sect, a political ritual to assert their collective will. It would construct a new self and that would controvert the established cosmologies of power in the local society. The *namgan*, in other words, were songs of self-assertion for boosting the collective ego of an upwardly mobile community:

*Bhara buke khola chule, jay Harichand bole,
Danda dekhi Matua santan,
Dam dam maro danka, chhinde phelo sab shanka
Maha byome uda re nishan.
Bhabna ar karishki, benche theke maris ki?
Bado hoye hali hataman,
Jago, jago, jago bir, soja kore rakho sir,
Jak jan benche thak man.'*⁷⁶

The devotees of Matua, with bare chests and loose hair, stand to hail Harichand. Beat your drums, get rid of all your fears and hoist your flag up in the sky. What are you thinking of? Do you want to behave like dead people, while you are still alive? Though you are great, you have been denied honour. So awake, O brave men. Hold your heads high, do not give up self-respect, even though you have to sacrifice your life.

The tenets of the Matua sect were thus constructed to suit the needs of a lowly, self-assertive peasant community and for this reason its ideology was also deliberately given an oppositional form. It was meant to oppose the Shankarite Vedantism which was considered to

be the quintessence of the Brahmanya dharma, devised to keep the toiling Sudras in a perpetual state of subordination. Vedantism was the monistic philosophy of spiritual salvation. While the world was regarded as an illusion, salvation meant getting out of the illusory worldly bondages and attaining the supreme truth, or Brahma, who eluded embodiment. The Bhakti tradition, on the other hand, was against this philosophy of monism; it opposed the concept of an illusory world, and desirability of spiritual salvation in the other world. In this tradition, the world was true and represented variegated manifestations of the supreme being, who claimed the loving devotion of the mortal beings.⁷⁷ Harichand developed this difference in perspectives into a position of opposition. He believed that Vedantism inculcated a theory of despair; by advocating renunciation of worldly desires, it deliberately demotivated the working people, and mentally conditioned them into accepting their subordinate position in society, while contemplating salvation in the other world.⁷⁸ At a period when Ramakrishna Paramahansa was popularizing Vedantism among middle-class upper-caste Bengalis, Harichand preached the hollowness of the quest for spiritual salvation (*'muktispriha sunya nai sadhan bhajan'*) and advised his disciples to go in quest of a proper livelihood (*'Grihasther mul bhitti arthaniti bate/Banijye basate Lakshmi ei bani rate'*).⁷⁹ Guruchand attacked the doctrine of renunciation in sharper terms: those whose major concern was how to procure food could not, he thought, afford to waste time in pursuit of spiritual abstractions (*'kemanee palibe dharma anna chinta jar'*).⁸⁰ For the hungry, food was God and their major duty was to seek the favour of this supreme God or Annabrahma.⁸¹ They must also propitiate the Goddess of wealth, for wealth was the source of all power and those who were favoured by Lakshmi, received the favour of Narayana as well (*'Arthe jano mahasakti Lakshmir bahan/Jatha Lakshmi tar kachhe achhe Narayan'*).⁸² But their quest for wealth must not be through unscrupulous means or lead to unbounded greed. The ideal path was to combine *bhakti* with *karma*, or spiritual devotion with material action. The dictum of *hate kam mukhe nam* (doing worldly duties while chanting His holy name),⁸³ as Harichand had defined it, became the guiding principle of the Matua philosophy of life. The sect, unlike others of its genre, thus inculcated a work ethic, which was necessary to motivate an upwardly mobile community still cowed down by servitude.

The majority of this community depended on agriculture and the primary unit in the organization of agricultural production was the family. Hence the Matua sect attached utmost importance to the orderly maintenance of family life in keeping with the values of a settled agricultural society, and advised its disciples to perform the duties of a householder or *grahasthya dharma*.⁸⁴ The sect did not preach asceticism (*'sanyasir dharma jaha, ei dharma nahe taha'*),⁸⁵ nor did it prescribe *brahmacharya* or continence in the sense of a complete withholding of semen.⁸⁶ Guruchand, in contrast to what Ramakrishna was preaching to his middle-class householder disciples, did not consider '*kamini-kanchan*' or women and wealth, as obstacles in the path of *bhakti*, nor did he consider women as gateways to hell (*'naraker dwar'*).⁸⁷ On the contrary, women were regarded as equal partners in family life, essential to men for reproduction, as soil was important to peasants for continuing the cycle of agricultural production.⁸⁸ But this did not mean unbridled sexuality, as the householder was also expected to generate in himself the qualities of an ascetic. The ideal man was he who could control his sexuality. Looking at him was akin to going on a pilgrimage (*'Deher indriya bas karechhe je jan/Tanr darsane sab teertha darsan'*).⁸⁹ The proper performance of familial duties required a combination of two qualities or *guna*, i.e. *raja* and *sattwa*: the former motivated people to work, while the latter elevated them above worldly desires.⁹⁰ The flag of the Matua sect therefore contains two colours: it is red with a white border—red representing the *raja* and the white standing for the *sattwa* qualities.⁹¹

Family life which was so stressed upon in Matua philosophy was thus to be regulated in accordance with strict sexual discipline—chastity of women and restrained sexual behaviour of men were virtues repeatedly extolled in the preachings of the gurus.⁹² The classical Bhakti tradition never allowed licentious behaviour in the name of religion and the lower-caste Jai Vaishnava devotees were looked down upon on account of their promiscuity. They were stigmatized for their extramarital affairs, and the ever-increasing number of illegitimate children swelling their ranks.⁹³ The various 'deviant' orders, which attracted the largest number of such lower-caste devotees, were stereotyped as assemblies of low-born sensual people flocking together for indulging in immoral sexual activities.⁹⁴ The freedom of sexual behaviour, which supposedly characterized social relations at the lower stratum of the society, were

condemned on the ground that they did not conform to the moral standards of the orthodox upper-caste society. The elite culture often tried to transform or suppress many aspects of common behaviour, in an attempt to sponsor a 'popular' or mass culture which would conform to the social ethic of the higher orders. And popular religions, in spite of their initial irreverent tendencies, often ended by providing theological legitimization of such elitist reformation of the manners and behaviour of the people.

The Matua sect also performed the same social role, though it did so to fulfil certain specific needs of the community which constituted its primary clientele. The Namasudras during their earlier phase of amphibious existence, were known for their 'partiality for spirits and swine's [*sic*] flesh',⁹⁵ as also for a perceived slackness in maintaining sexual discipline, which upper-caste society often condemned as lack of morality and manners.⁹⁶ The difference in norms was, in all probability, partly due to the physical environment, which does not appear to have been very congenial to the maintenance of well-defined and tightly-structured kinship relations. Partly, it might have been also the legacy of a permissive free-mixing tribal culture. But as these people were gradually transformed into a settled agricultural community and were drawn into the main body of Hindu society, its leaders felt a compulsion to conform to the accepted norms of moral behaviour, prescribed for the higher castes of that society. This conformity was necessary for the legitimization of their new social status, i.e. in order to be accepted into Hindu society and to be regarded as respectable by fellow Hindus. The Matua sect, therefore, attempted at a reformation of the manners of the Namasudras at a mass level, and thus also tried to avoid the stigma attached to the other 'deviant' orders. Since, within the orthodox normative system, marriage was regarded as the only legitimate outlet for human sexuality and sex outside wedlock was looked at as adultery and therefore immoral ('*swadareshu ratischaiba paradara bisarjanam*'),⁹⁷ Harichand advised his disciples to enter into family life only in association with duly wedded wives and to regard other women as mothers.⁹⁸ Guruchand also instructed the Matua devotees to refrain from adultery, as this would bring infamy to their community.⁹⁹ The model of proper sexual relationship and behaviour was also popularized through the later devotional songs of the sect:

Nari karo pati sar, pati chhada chhusne ar . . .
*Paranari matrisama, nare mono e niyam . . .*¹⁰⁰

Women! consider your husbands to be everything in your lives. Do not *any more* touch other persons except your husbands. . . . Men! remember the dictum that all women other than your wives are like your mothers . . .

The song clearly indicates the earlier freedom in the man–woman relationship and the subsequent transition to disciplined sexual behaviour. As the community shifted from floating boats to homestead lands, began to acquire occupancy right over reclaimed cultivable fields, accumulated property, and enjoyed rights of inheritance, there arose a need for more strictly structured families and social discipline. And this practical need was philosophized, as the devotional songs of the sect portrayed uncontrolled sexual desire as the greatest of the six enemies (*vices* or *ripu*) of mankind.¹⁰¹ Ideal love, it was emphasized, was that which was devoid of sexual passion, and that was love for Hari, which filled the mind with divine and endless joy.¹⁰²

As the songs of the Matua sect composed at a later period indicate, this attempt at enforcement of public morality was associated with a conceptualization of the type of family structured according to the notions of patriarchy. In the traditional Hindu extended families, relations were classified according to age, generation, and gender into a hierarchical structure of obedience, with the lowest position, in terms of rights and resources, being occupied by women, who were expected to obey their husbands.¹⁰³ Such notions of hierarchy in family relations were derived no doubt from the ideology of hierarchy that determined the broader Hindu social structure, which the Matua sect had sought to defy. Yet, gradually the same notions began to influence Matua perceptions and they began to visualize families where elders or *guruja*n enjoyed the position of privilege, while women were expected to serve others and obey their husbands.¹⁰⁴ The ideal chaste woman was she who worshipped the feet of her husband (*sati nari bhabe je jan, puja kare patir charan*), and for her no other form of worship was necessary to attain salvation (*meyer sadhan bhajan nai . . . thakte swami barttamane*).¹⁰⁵ This is quite in contrast to the early liberalism of the sect which had once allowed women equal rights to participate

in its congregational religious life. And not only that, women also came to be regarded as obstacles in the path of spiritual salvation,¹⁰⁶ a stereotype which Guruchand had once denounced so severely as an upper-caste Vedantic distortion. As the Namasudra disciples moved up on the social scale, or aspired to do so, they felt compelled to adopt the orthodox norms of gender relations and the structures of their families also had to look like those of upper-caste Hindus, who were their point of reference for such compulsive remodelling of cultural group behaviour. But as a result, women lost their freedom and also perhaps respect, which the Matua sect had once promised them.

Such conformism or selective absorption of symbols or ideas from the elite culture or established philosophical traditions was observable in many other aspects of later Matua life. The first and foremost example of this was the acceptance of the theory of incarnation. Harichand, as many of the devotional songs of the sect indicate, was believed to have been the incarnation of Hari or Krishna.¹⁰⁷ As legend would have it, Harichand wished to entrust to Lord Siva his unfinished task of bringing salvation to lower-caste people. The latter listened to his prayer, and so Siva was born in his family as Harichand's son. Immediately after Harichand died, his soul entered the body of Guruchand, who thus became the dual incarnation, combining in himself both the devotion and love of Hari or Krishna and the energy and prowess of Hara or Siva.¹⁰⁸ The concept appears to have been derived from the orthodox Vaishnava tradition, for Jiva Goswami's *Bhaktisandarbhā* makes it clear that only the avatars of Krishna could become the objects of the disciples' devotion and that Siva should be worshipped as well, since he was intrinsically a Vaishnava.¹⁰⁹ Paradoxically, the canonical formulations of the Goswamins of Vrindavan had thus set the limits for their critics' imagination, even though they wanted to build up what were popularly conceived as 'deviant' orders. But the adaptation, in this case, was considered to be essential, for the gurus believed that their followers, in order to assert themselves, needed both the gospels of *bhakti* (devotion) and *karma* (action). Moreover, the adoption of familiar cosmological concepts made the sect acceptable to the common people; radically different or revolutionary concepts might not have been so popular, as people usually are not so easily attracted to innovations.

In a similar way, and perhaps for similar reasons, *gurubad* was also incorporated into the belief system of the Matua sect. Not only were the first preceptors deified, as we have already noted, but their early disciples, who were instrumental in the wider dissemination of their ideas, were believed to have also shared their supernatural powers. The Matua literature repeatedly emphasizes that the early organizers of the sect, men like Gopal Sadhu, Nabagosain, Gosain Tarakchand, Hiranman Gosain, Lochan Gosain, etc. were not gurus, but devotees themselves.¹¹⁰ But the way in which their glories have been sung in numerous devotional songs of the sect leaves little doubt that they too had assumed the position of Sravanaguru or Sikshaguru, if not Dikshaguru.¹¹¹ Even the latter concept, particularly the notion that the intermediacy of guru was essential for spiritual salvation, appears to have gained greater acceptance as some of the lines of these songs quoted below indicate.

1. *Guru gosainr daya habe, karmabandhan jabe ghuche.*

If the *guru gosain* is kind enough, earthly bondage will disappear.

2. *Jadi jabi opar, kar Sriguru kandari, Harinamer tari.*

If you want to sail across to the other world, make *Harinam* your boat and accept the guru as the boatman.

3. *Srigurur bakya dharo, anitya tarka chhado,
Edeha sukshma karo, jabe bhabe chinte.*

Have faith in the words of the *guru* and do not indulge in argumentation. Concentrate on your finer body [i.e. soul] and your worldly worries will vanish.¹¹²

The lines quoted above do not merely emphasize the spiritual supremacy of the guru, but also indicate that the concepts of an illusory world and the primacy of the goal of salvation in the other world, which both Harichand and Guruchand were so averse to, had gained currency among their later disciples. In the collection of Matua songs, there are numerous examples which imply that the theory of *maya* and renunciation of worldly pleasures or *kamini-kanchan* (women and wealth) had been internalized by the followers of the Matua sect during a later period.

1. *Miche mayar akinchane, majiye kamini-kanchane;
Ami apni jwale papagune, apan prane dagdha hoi.*

Lured by women and wealth, which are trivial and illusory, I have burnt myself in the fire of sin; it burns my heart.

2. *Ami bhaber abhajan, na jani tomari sadtian,
Mayarase matta hoye karechi bishay bish grahan.*

I am an unfortunate person in this world; I do not know how to propitiate you. Duped by *maya*, I have taken the poison called material wealth.

3. *Kamini kuhak rase, magna hoye achi bose,
Sadhan bhajan habe kise, bhulechi may ay.*

I have succumbed to the mysterious charms of women. I do not know how I shall undertake my spiritual duties, as I have been bemused by *maya*.

4. *Miche rajat kanchan, e dhana jauban,
Gurur pade samarpan kariba ekhan.*

Wealth and youth are all false; I shall now surrender everything at the feet of the guru.¹¹³

The absorption of philosophical notions from the established or orthodox religious order was symptomatic of the Matuas' inability to escape the dominant cultural influence. This was not unexpected, as the Namasudra devotees of the sect had no wish to live in social isolation. On the contrary, the major objective of the community was to seek integration into the constituted social structure and this necessitated absorption of the dominant cultural values of that society. Although the Matua sect sought to subvert the caste hierarchy, the Namasudras could not escape the pervasive influence of caste ideology. In the late 1880s, Risley had found them to be 'very particular as regards caste prejudices', never allowing 'a European to stand or walk over their cooking place'.¹¹⁴ Later, as their movement gained momentum, they began to demand a higher position within the ritual hierarchy itself and referred to their Brahman origin, tracing their ancestry from the ancient Brahman sage Kashyap.¹¹⁵ In the first Namasudra meeting in 1881, Guruchand himself, in his presidential address, had spoken about the Brahman origin of his caste.¹¹⁶ The origin myth that was later constructed to authenticate this claim to

Brahman status was derived directly from *Manusmriti*,¹¹⁷ as otherwise it would not convince the orthodox society. Later these notions were spread through devotional songs,¹¹⁸ and *jatra* (folk theatre),¹¹⁹ as dramatical forms of expression were expected to have a greater impact on the popular mind. The Namasudra followers of the Matua sect were, in other words, simultaneously trying to negate the caste ideology of hierarchy, and seeking accommodation within the same ritual structure. Thus rebellion and conformism went hand in hand, the latter tendency being as powerful as the former. In the subsequent myths of the sect, Harichand appeared as a Brahman who had lost his caste by marrying a Namasudra woman.¹²⁰ This is an evidence par excellence of conformism, the Brahman being considered as the highest being and the woman being stereotyped as a defiling agent. These were the very notions which had been emphasized repeatedly in the *puranas* and by the *Smritikaras* from Manu to Raghunandan, down to the early-twentieth-century orthodox commentators on *jatimala*, who upheld the dominant cultural values of a hierarchical society, where rank was ascriptive, hereditary and corporate, and groups were defined by endogamy.

Indeed, in the Namasudra mental world these dominant religio-cultural values were by no means completely rejected; nor in popular perceptions, whatever the gurus might say, did the Matua cult ever appear in an oppositional form. In the late nineteenth century, Risley had found them participating in *bastu* (earth) *puja*, *bansura* (river god) *puja*, *nauka* (boat) *puja* and *manasa* (snake goddess) *puja*.¹²¹ In the same period, another report from Dacca shows that the Namasudras looked upon all gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon 'with veneration', though they were 'prohibited from worshipping the costly pujas themselves on account of the cost'. Their principal deities were, however, Manasa (who had gained access to the Hindu pantheon), Lakshmi and Kartik.¹²² As time passed, the Namasudras became zealous participants in all the Hindu festivals and on several occasions even got involved in violent conflicts with upper-caste Hindus, either in order to assert their rights to participate in such public festivals as Bhawani *puja*,¹²³ or to gain access to the sanctum sanctorum of Kali temples.¹²⁴ The conflicts, on the one hand, implied a growing protest on the part of the Namasudras against the disabilities of caste; but they indicated as well their eagerness to participate in the mainstream

Hindu religious life, as both the deities, Bhawani and Kali, belonged to the Sakta tradition of Hinduism, which was quite opposed to the Vaishnava background of the Matua sect. This identification with established Hindu religious life became more and more pronounced or self-evident with the passage of time. What a Namasudra historian himself writes about their own religious practices is worth quoting in this respect: 'In every Namasudra village in east Bengal, they remain busy with thirteen religious festivals in twelve months. At the time of Durga puja, in every Namasudra-populated area, the puja is celebrated with great fanfare. Apart from this, the members of this community perform like orthodox Hindus all other festivals of Hindu society, such as Kalipuja, Lakshmipuja, Manasapuja, Bastupuja etc . . .'¹²⁵

This indicates the Namasudras' integration into the mainstream of Hindu religious life. Popular religion in its wider sense, or the religion which the vast mass of people actually practised, was thus not very different from, and much less antagonistic to, the established religion of the dominant elites.

IV

The real importance of the Matua sect lies in the fact that it did not merely provide a religion for the masses, but offered a philosophy and organization for the social movement of a depressed community. Gradually, the sect attracted more and more devotees from the Namasudra population of Faridpur, Bakarganj, Dacca, Khulna, Jessore, and Tippera districts,¹²⁶ and the leaders of the community began to use this religious platform for organizing a social protest against their degraded condition. Not only did Guruchand's teachings motivate the community to become more self-assertive, but he himself, with his influence as a charismatic religious preceptor, became the leader of their social movement, and Orakandi, his ancestral village, virtually became its headquarters. While Harichand had advised his disciples to combine action with devotion (*hate kam mukhe nam*), his son Guruchand, conscious of the material needs of a depressed community, attached more emphasis to action, which he thought was necessary to generate in them a motivation for the acquisition of wealth. Guruchand's preachings therefore stood as a major deviation from the established Bhakti tradition which, as Max Weber would

put it, tended to destroy the rational urge towards accumulation of property.¹²⁷ The doctrine of renunciation, Guruchand believed, had no significance for those who never enjoyed the fruits of life. Nor was it advisable for them, for similar reasons, to be lost in pure mystical devotion. 'Earn money, be educated and become respectable',¹²⁸ was therefore his principal advice to the disciples. And this emanated from his clear understanding of the power relationships in society, which deprived the Namasudras of the opportunities of life. As we learn from his disciple-biographer, Guruchand often used to tell his followers that the Namasudras, though strong in number, were not respected by anybody as they had no power and it was power alone which could command respect.¹²⁹ As his other teachings indicate, he was also conscious of the locus of real power in a colonial state and the opportunities which that state system had offered as the sinews of power for a colonized indigenous society.

Education, Guruchand thought, was the first prerequisite for the acquisition of power, or in other words, for resisting the domination of the existing power elites. As the Namasudra peasants could not read or write, he argued, they were continually exploited and defrauded by the landlords and their agents, and were thus deprived of their legitimate share of the fruits of their own labour. Hence no matter whether they had food or not, they must educate their children. He stressed this point again and again before his disciples. And as a first step towards dissemination of education among his followers, he himself established a *pathsala* (lower primary school) in 1880 in his village Orakandi.¹³⁰ When that school ran into financial difficulties on account of the local Kayastha zamindar's non-co-operation, he invited, much to the dislike of many of his disciples, the Australian Baptist missionary, Dr C.S. Mead, to open a mission and a school at Orakandi on a plot of land donated by himself.¹³¹ This missionary connection was considered to be crucial for a number of reasons. Education which the missionaries offered was essential for the Namasudras not only to escape zamindar-high-caste oppression, but also to gain access to the new world of professions which, Guruchand thought, was a necessary step towards achieving social respectability.¹³² The major factor that was perceived to be responsible for the relative backwardness of the Namasudras in the spheres of education and professions was the unequal competition with the traditionally privileged upper castes. They could overcome

this handicap only with the help of the superior state power and it was Mead who established the preliminary connection between them and the colonial government. Through Mead's mediation, in 1907 the first Namasudra delegation, headed by Guruchand himself, met Sir Lancelot Hare, the then Lieutenant Governor of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, and apprised him of their grievances and expectations. Interestingly, immediately after this meeting, Guruchand's son Sashi Bhushan Thakur, and some of his close associates, like Tarini Charan Bala and Kumud Behari Mullick, received government appointments.¹³³ Their community regarded this as a symbol of recognition by the ruling authorities—a recognition totally absent in the pre-British days and which, they believed, would ensure them better treatment from the local Hindu society as well.¹³⁴ A further recognition came in 1911, when the census authorities, in response to Mead's recommendation, Guruchand's persuasion, and the persistent agitation of the community, recognized it as 'Namasudra', dropping once and for all the hated appellation 'Chandal' from their decennial reports.¹³⁵ In 1912, in recognition of his services to his community and the Raj, Guruchand was honoured with a *darbar* medal, which was presented to him by Lord Carmichael at a special meeting at Faridpur district headquarters.¹³⁶ On this occasion, Guruchand is known to have purchased a ceremonial dress at the exorbitant price of Rs 500.¹³⁷ What he appears to have aimed at was a spectacle that would both impress the established elites of the society, and generate in his community a sense of collective pride for this recognition by the state power.

To Guruchand, the rising tide of the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century appeared to be detrimental to the community-centric interests of the Namasudras. His attitude to nationalism became clear during the Swadeshi movement, which seemingly threatened to engulf the Namasudra protest. He and his associates successfully persuaded the members of their community to believe that *swadeshi* was a slogan of the rich high-caste Hindu gentry, who had always in the past oppressed the Namasudra peasantry, both socially and economically. The movement, as the guru told his disciples, was entirely in the interest of the affluent classes, which wanted to shift the burden to the poor peasants by forcing them to buy more expensive Swadeshi goods. Never in the past had these nationalist leaders ever

spoken a word against the inhuman treatment which the Namasudras and the lower castes had been subjected to. So now if they wanted their participation, they should first wage a battle against social inequities. But this, as Guruchand informed his followers, these leaders were not prepared for, as their movement was without a social content.¹³⁸ The identification of the Swadeshi movement with the oppressive gentry seemed to be self-evident, as most of its leaders and volunteers in east Bengal came from this social class which frequently used its coercive power to compel the Namasudra peasants to participate in the movement.¹³⁹ The latter detested this and the antipathy that was generated persisted through the days of the non-co-operation and civil disobedience movements. Chittaranjan Das is believed to have personally written to Guruchand asking him to ensure the participation of the Namasudras in the non-co-operation movement. But he refused to respond, for he believed that this movement, too, like the earlier one, was only meant to further the interests of the wealthy upper-caste *bhadralok*. The way the guru explained the situation to his disciples reveals his understanding of the social realities around him and his perceptive judgement on the nature of the nationalist movement. In an average educated high-caste extended family, he mentioned, usually one brother was a lawyer, the second a clerk, while the third was a trader. So while the lawyer brother would leave the court and join the non-co-operation movement, the clerk would retain his job to maintain the family, while the businessman would actually make profit by selling *khadi*. So the poor Namasudra peasants who were not connected with any office, court, or trade should not participate in this movement, as it would not bring any tangible benefit to them. When India would attain freedom, he argued, it would be a freedom for the privileged upper castes, while the lower orders would remain deprived as they always had been. 'The day we feel that this is our country', Guruchand is reported to have told his disciples, 'we will lay down our lives to remove the miseries of our motherland.'¹⁴⁰ The words might well have been his biographer's, rather than his own; but these represent a mentality which both Guruchand and his contemporary followers might have shared. It indicates that the antipathy towards nationalism was not just a manifestation of loyalty to the British. On the contrary, it was more an expression of protest against social and economic injustices perpetrated on them by the

high-caste gentry and professional classes, who had long constituted the leadership of the struggle against the Raj. Their mentality, in other words, reflected a social perception in which nationalism, for obvious reasons, appeared as elitist, leading to a consequent inclination to defy its ideological hegemony.

As a result of such persuasion, the Namasudras in large parts of eastern Bengal remained almost completely unaffected by the non-co-operation or the civil disobedience movements; at different places they also actively opposed such nationalist agitations.¹⁴¹ This did not reflect their passivity, for Guruchand himself believed that if the Namasudras did not actively participate in politics, social power would continue to elude them.¹⁴² But their politics was to be of a different nature; its prime objective would be to demand their legitimate share of the opportunities created by the colonial state, i.e. education, employment and political representation. Since 1906, the colonial policy of protective discrimination in favour of the Muslims had generated similar expectations in the minds of the Namasudras. They also demanded special privileges for a depressed minority and Guruchand's son Sashi Bhushan Thakur maintained close contact with Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, the leader of the East Bengali Muslims, 'to co-ordinate a joint resistance to the antipartition agitation.'¹⁴³ Such demands continued to be raised even in later years, particularly on the eve of the announcement of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919) and again on the arrival of the Indian Statutory Commission (1928).¹⁴⁴ In 1930, at a meeting at Khulna Sadar town, Guruchand himself emphasized in his presidential address that emancipation of the lower castes and the untouchables would never be accomplished unless and until they had a share of the political power which had been devolved upon the Indian people through successive constitutional reforms.¹⁴⁵ And this could be ensured only through a separate electorate, which the Communal Award of 1932 ultimately provided for. The Faridpur Namasudras, therefore, upheld the 'Award', even while Gandhi was continuing his fast to secure abrogation of its provision of a separate electorate for the Scheduled Castes; they also condemned the Poona Pact which took away this privilege.¹⁴⁶ In the elections that followed in 1937, a number of Guruchand's close associates, including his grandson Pramatha Ranjan Thakur (popularly known as P.R. Thakur), now

an England-returned barrister, contested and won as 'Independent' candidates. Their subsequent decision to support the Krishak Praja Party-Muslim League coalition government reduced the Congress, the representative of 'mainstream' nationalism, to the position of a minority party in the Bengal Legislative Assembly.¹⁴⁷

Yet, the political behaviour of the Namasudras cannot be called separatist *per se*, for they were pursuing only what they considered to be the legitimate interests of their community. And these very interests, as these were perceived, also dictated that their ultimate objective should be to seek integration into the political nation, as respectable members of that larger community. Till about 1937, the Namasudra leadership had maintained a distance from the Congress. But soon they were disappointed with the new coalition ministry, which did precious little for the benefit of the Scheduled Castes.¹⁴⁸ The Congress now tried to capitalize on this disaffection to appropriate the Scheduled Caste movement, and the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, formed in early 1937, became the vital link between the two movements. P.R.Thakur, who was at the helm of the Namasudra movement since his return from England in 1930, was associated with this League, while on the Congress side the persons who were really instrumental in forging this new alliance were the two Bose brothers, Subhas and Sarat. It was due to their initiative that around the beginning of 1938 a number of prominent Namasudra legislators, including P.R.Thakur, agreed to co-operate with the Congress and withdraw their support from the Muslim League-backed ministry.¹⁴⁹ This was followed by their meeting with Gandhi in March 1938, where P.R.Thakur expressed in no uncertain words his lingering suspicions about the sincerity and good intentions of the high-caste Congress leaders.¹⁵⁰ But the problems were soon resolved, as there was now visibly more initiative on the part of the Congress leaders to win over the Namasudras. Guruchand died in 1937 and at the meeting called on his first death anniversary, Subhas Bose, in his presidential address, paid glowing tributes to the late leader of the backward classes.¹⁵¹ This was soon followed by Gandhi's personal letter to P.R. Thakur, describing his grandfather as 'a great guru'.¹⁵² Then in July 1938, on a personal invitation from Gandhi, P.R. Thakur went on a tour of the Congress-ruled provinces and on his return issued a press statement that he was very impressed with the achievements of the various Congress

governments 'in improving the lot of the Scheduled Caste people'.¹⁵³ A few months later, on 28 May 1939, as the President of the All Bengal Namasudra Conference, held at Tamluk, he advised the members of his community to 'join the National Congress and fight for India's freedom'.¹⁵⁴ This was a complete reversal of Guruchand's political stand—the trajectory of events during the last few years of the 1930s only shows how rapidly the political alienation of the grandfather had given way to the integrationist ideology of the grandson. The transformation was however rooted in the logic of the movement itself, which as its ultimate objective had sought accommodation within the emerging power structure of the Indian nation state, which at the time of the beginning of the Second World War appeared to be a distinct possibility.

During all these years of hectic political activities and shifting allegiances, the Matua sect however remained at the centre of the social universe of the Namasudras, providing their movement with the crucial organizational base. One of the slogans of Guruchand, *jar dal nei tar bal nei*,¹⁵⁵ i.e. those who do not form a group do not have power, conveyed the message of organizing for collective action. And it was around this sect that the initial mobilization of the Namasudras took place, as the original disciples of Guruchand, known as the 'sixty-four *mohantas*', preached the ideas of Hari-Guruchand and gathered around them hundreds of devotees from various parts of the province.¹⁵⁶ To bring them under an organizational network, a Matua Mahasangha was started sometime before 1915, through the initiative of one of the early disciples, Tarak Gosain. P.R. Thakur, after his return from England, thought of reactivating this social organization and convened at Orakandi a general conference of the Matua devotees in 1931.¹⁵⁷ The following year, the endeavour of Gopal Sadhu gave the sangha the modern organizational shape of a 'mission' and an ashram was started at Khulna district town on a plot of hundred *bighas* of land, where Namasudra students, coming from poor peasant families, could stay and continue their studies.¹⁵⁸ Through these organizations the upper echelon of the community could effectively reach the grass-roots and communicate their messages of a social and political movement. The various other community organizations of a more political nature, such as the Namasudra Hitaishini Samiti (started in 1902), the Bengal Namasudra Association (started in 1912) or the Bengal

Depressed Classes Federation (started in 1932), maintained a close relationship with these socio-religious organizations, as these offered the most convenient means for mass contact.¹⁵⁹

At a less organized and informal level also, the Matua sect provided further opportunities for social mobilization. The Baruni *mela*, their most popular religious festival, was held to celebrate the birth anniversary of Harichand on the last day of the Bengali month, Chaitra (mid-April). At different places, the most important among them being Orakandi and Lakshmikhali, the *mela* attracted thousands of devotees across local boundaries and made social interaction and exchange of ideas among them possible.¹⁶⁰ Apart from this Guruchand's annual *sradh* ceremony provided a similar occasion for socio-religious gatherings, which the Namasudra leaders skilfully used to inculcate their political message among the ordinary members of their community.¹⁶¹ Thus they systematically tried to convert their strength of number into a source of political power—a political imperative which Guruchand himself had drawn their attention to.

V

The Matua sect, as it would appear from the foregoing discussion, had developed along with the emergence of a low-ranking, upwardly-mobile community—the Namasudras of eastern Bengal. As the amphibious boatmen were transformed into a peasant community, with the reclamation of the marshy wastes, they developed certain emotional and practical needs to adjust themselves to the new social situation. First of all, the new social identity that was now constructed had to be asserted and this necessitated an attempt to subvert the ritual hierarchy or defy the social authority of the dominant higher-caste elites. This required, in other words, a reworking of the relations of power in local society, for which the Matua sect provided them with solidarity and self-confidence. The congregational nature of the sect and the ritual of group singing of devotional songs, helped them to develop, and continually reinforce, a sense of collectivity, and this was possible as the sect remained more or less coterminous with this particular community. On the other hand, as these people developed their peasant identity, it became mandatory for them to adopt and internalize the prevalent cultural ethos of the settled agricultural

society. Accommodation within the main structure of Hindu society would alone legitimize their new social status and therefore, they felt the compulsion to conform to the dominant moral and behavioural codes of that society. And the Matua sect helped them in this process of acculturation, by undertaking the reformation of the manners and customs of the community at a mass level.

As the Matua sect was an integral component of the sociopolitical movement of the Namasudras, its philosophical tenets were determined by this community's cultural and material needs. It therefore selectively and creatively appropriated or adapted ideas and symbols from the existing philosophical discourses. It oscillated in, and never tried to break out of, a continuum that had the rationalist universal humanism of the Bengal Renaissance at the one end, and the heretical radicalism of the deviant religious sects at the other. Its universalism could not be pushed very far, because of its community-centric moorings. Its subversive edge was blunted by this community's urge for accommodation. While sexual morality and structured family life were stressed upon, there was also an attempt to generate a rational motivation for accumulation of wealth. Above all, there was always an awareness of the relations of power in society and a consequent earnest desire to acquire power through participation in institutional politics. The alienation of the leaders of the Namasudra community from mainstream nationalism ultimately gave place, in course of three generations, to an integrationist stand, as it was felt that their strength of number had now been converted into a position of power. But what had really effected this conversion was the social organization of the Matua sect. By facilitating social interaction across status barriers within the community, it had articulated a community consciousness among the Namasudras and thus had helped their leaders to mobilize a mass following in support of their politics. It was largely because of this cohesive impact that by the end of the 1930s the Namasudras were being recognized as a well-organized power base in the institutional politics of Bengal. The real significance of the Matua sect therefore lies in the fact that it had offered a philosophy and organization which, in course of little more than half a century, could effectively elevate a backward community to a position of social and political importance. It had helped them to construct and assert a new collective self-image, when necessary even by attempting a subversion of the existing relations of power. But when their protest was ultimately coopted

into the hegemonic order, it was this sect again which palliated that accommodation process. Its philosophy was neither revolutionary and radical, nor irrational and exotic. Its proper meaning and importance can be comprehended only if it is situated in its social context, provided by the impulsive urge of an upwardly mobile community to establish itself in a position of honour within the wider matrix of social and political relations in colonial Bengal.

Notes

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2. Barry Reay, 'Popular Religion', in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England*, ed. Barry Reay (London, 1988), p. 91.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
4. Natalie Z. Davis, 'Some Themes and Tasks in the Study of Popular Religion', in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. C. Trinkaus and H.A. Oberman (Leiden, 1974), pp. 308–9, 313.
5. Roger Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France', in *Understanding Popular Culture*, p. 235.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
7. H.H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (London, 1891, rptd Calcutta, 1981), vol. I, p. 189; *Census of India*, 1901, vol. VI, pt I, pp. 395–6, 459; vol. VIA, pt II, table XIII, p. 246; *Bengal District Gazetteers*, B Volume (Calcutta, 1933), for the districts of Bakarganj, Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday O Bangladesh* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1368 B.S.), p. 1.
8. Gobinda Chandra Basak, *Bangiya Jatimala* (in Bengali; 2nd edn, Dacca, 1318 B.S.), p. 67; James Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (London, 1883), p. 257; H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, pp. 183–5; Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangali Hindur Varnabhed* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1352 B.S.), p. 104.
9. Jogindra Narayan Ray, *Jatitattva* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1316 B.S.), p. 38; Jogeschandra Dasgupta, *Jatibikash ba Chudamanitattva* (in Bengali; Rangpur, 1319 B.S.), p. 67; Asutosh Mukhopadhyay, *Jati-bijnan* (in Bengali; Jaynagar, 24-Parganas, 1321 B.S.), p. 82; Pitambar Sarkar, *Jati-Bikas* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1910), pp. 48, 75–6, 82–3.
10. *Brihaddharmapuram*, ed. H.P. Shastri, Bibliotheca Indica, Asiatic Society of Bengal (Calcutta, 1888), p. 578; *Brahmavaivarttapuranam*, ed. Panchanan Tarkaratna (Calcutta, 1391 B.S.), pp. 22, 25–7.

11. Bani Chakraborti, *Samaj Sanskarak Raghunandan* (2nd revised edn, Calcutta, 1970), pp. 33, 256–1.
12. Mukundaram, *Chandimangala*, ed. Sukumar Sen, Sahitya Academy (New Delhi, 1975), p. 81; also see, Bharatchandra, *Annadamangala*, in *Bharatchandra Granthabali*, ed. Brojendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajani Kanta Das, Bangiya Sahitya Parishat (3rd edn, Calcutta, 1369 B.S.), p. 171.
13. Report (of the enquiry) by H.E. Stapleton, D.P.I., Bengal, to Secretary, Government of Bengal, Education Department, 22 March 1929, Government of Bengal, Appointment Department Proceedings, File No. 5M-114 of 1928, February 1930, Proceedings nos. 7–20, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta (hereafter WBSA).
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15. See various reports in 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', vol. VI, Mss.Eur.E.101, India Office Library, London (hereafter IOL), pp. 59–60, 103, 108, 117, 125, 128, 130, 133, 136ff.
16. For anecdotal evidence of such ambivalent behaviour, see Madhusudan Sarkar, 'Sparshadosh Prathar Rakshashi Murti', *Nabyabharat*, 12:12, Chaitra 1301 B.S., pp. 641–3; Haridas Palit, *Bangiya Patit Jatir Karmee* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1322 B.S.), pp. 2–3; Sarat Kumar Ray, *Mahatma Aswini Kumar* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1333 B.S.), pp. 97–8.
17. For some examples of this type of literature, see note 9.
18. Lalmohan Vidyanidhi, *Sambandhanirnaya* (in Bengali; Calcutta, n.d.), p. 133.
19. *Census of India*, 1901, vol. VIA, pt II, pp. 480–1; *Census of India*, 1911, vol. V, pt II, pp. 370–3; for further details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Social Protest or Politics of Backwardness?—The Namasudra Movement in Bengal, 1872–1911', in *Dissent and Consensus: Social Protest in Pre-Industrial Societies*, ed. Basudeb Chattopadhyay, Hari S. Vasudevan and Rajat K. Ray (Calcutta, 1989), pp. 175–81.
20. For details on reclamation, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Social Protest', pp. 176–7.
21. For different meanings, see H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, p. 183, note 3; and Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, p. 68.
22. Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, p. 38.
23. James Wise, *Notes on the Races*, pp. 194, 256.
24. 'Ethnographical Papers: Social Status of Castes', vol. VI, Mss. Eur.E. 101, IOL, p. 128.
25. 'Caste File No. III', Mss.Eur.D.191, IOL, pp. 100, 104, 115.
26. Jogeschandra Pal, 'Banglar Hindu', *Bangabani*, 5 (2nd Half): 4, Agrahayan 1333 B.S., pp. 397–8; also see Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla* (in Bengali; Barisal, 1915), p. 290.

27. C.S. Mead, *The Namasudras and Other Addresses* (Adelaide, 1911), p. 76; for other details, see H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj: Its History and Statistics* (London, 1876), pp. 260–5.
28. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaishnava Sahajiya Cult of Bengal* (Chicago & London, 1966), pp. 71–2, 77.
29. 'Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 29, 58–9; 'Trends of Change in the Bhakti Movement in Bengal', Occasional Paper No. 76, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1985.
30. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, pp. 68–71, 78–81.
31. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1985), pp. 321–2, 333.
32. Quoted in Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas* (in Bengali; Hooghli, 1333 B.S.), p. 329.
33. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 90, 322.
34. Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, pp. 70–1, 82–3.
35. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 321, 325, 328–35, 339–40; J.N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects* (2nd edn, Calcutta, 1968), pp. 160, 185–6, 195, 200–12, 280, 367–9.
36. H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, p. 187.
37. H. Beveridge, *The District of Bakarganj*, pp. 260–5.
38. Jogendranath Gupta, *Bikrampur Itihas* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1316 B.S.), pp. 370–1.
39. Jasimuddin, *Murshida Gaan* (in Bengali; Bangla Academy, Dacca, 1977), pp. 36–42, 259, 262.
40. Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, pp. 399, 403–5.
41. For details of this movement, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Social Protest', pp. 183–4.
42. Memo from District Superintendent of Police to Magistrate of Faridpur, 18 March 1873, Government of Bengal, Judicial Department Proceedings, March 1873, no. 179, WBSA.
43. Paramananda Halder, *Matua Dharma Darshan* (in Bengali; Thakurnagar, 1393 B.S.), p. 47; Nityananda Halder, *Srihari Darshan* (in Bengali; Thakurnagar, 1392 B.S.), p. 54.
44. *Jibe daya name ruchi manushete nishtha, Iha chhada ar jato sab kriya bhrashto.*
Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Harileelamrita* (in Bengali; Faridpur, 1323 B.S.), p. 23.
45. *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 74–5, 78–9.

46. Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma Ki-O-Keno* (in Bengali; Thakurnagar, 1394 B.S.), pp. 1–4, 6–7; *Harileelamrita*, p. 67; *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 85–6.
47. *Harileelamrita*, p. 107; *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 157–8, 163.
48. Nityananda Haldar, *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar* (in Bengali; Thakurnagar, 1393 B.S.), p. 90; *Srihari Darshan*, p. 54.
49. *Matua Dharma Ki-O-Keno*, p. 7.
50. 'Kshatra garba nashta kari Samata anite Hari
Brahman Chandal sabe samajog dey.'
Mahananda Haldar, *Sri Sri Guruchand-charit* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1943), p. 72.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 203, 360.
52. *Srihari Darshan*, pp. 112–13.
53. Tarak Chandra Sarkar, *Sri Sri Mahasamkirtan* (in Bengali; 9th edn, Thakurnagar, 1394 B.S.), p. 69.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
56. *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 158–9.
57. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 203.
58. Chintaharan Chattopadhyay, *Brahman* (in Bengali; Faridpur, 1317 B.S.), pp. 70–1.
59. Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati. *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, pp. 196–7.
60. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 81–2, 321.
61. *Harileelamrita*, pp. 24, 73.
62. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 14.
63. *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, p. 33.
64. a) *Kaj ki amar mantrabije*
Harichand-chhabi rabir kirane uthalilo madhu hritsaroje.
Mahasamkirtan, p. 59.
b) *Gururupe Hari tumi, ese sarnsare,*
Tumi Hari haye Hari bole, nam dila sakalare.
Matua Sangeet, pt I, compiled by Matua Mahasangha, (in Bengali; 6th edn, Thakurnagar, 1393 B.S.), p. 65.
c) *Java jagatbandhu Guruchandrahe,*
Namasudra Kuloddharan kripasindhe.
Matua Sangeet, p. 11.
65. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 23.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
67. *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 69.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 573; also, 'Tuliya namer dheu prem plabanete/Dhuye muchhe niba sab nam plabanete', *Harileelamrita*, p. 73.
69. For examples, see note 64.

70. Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1989), pp. 20–30, 38–46, 240–6.
71. *Mahasamkirtan*, p. 2.
72. *Matua Sangeet*, p. 10.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
77. Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Bangla Kirtaner Itihas*, p. 43.
78. *Srihari Darshan*, pp. 38–9.
79. *Harileelamrita*, pp. 24, 73.
80. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 165.
81. *Srihari Darshan*, p. 127.
82. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 74.
83. *Harileelamrita*, p. 24; *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 129, 288.
84. *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, p. 17; *Srihari Darshan*, p. 94.
85. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 54.
86. *Srihari Darshan*, pp. 76–7.
87. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 2.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 251; *Matua Dharma Darshan*, p. 322.
89. *Harileelamrita*, p. 24.
90. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 236.
91. *Srihari Darshan*, p. 158; *Matua Mahasangher Sangbidhan ba Gathantantra* (in Bengali; 2nd edn, Thakurnagar, 1988), pp. 5–6.
92. *Guruchand-charit*, pp. 567–8.
93. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 74, 333–4; Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Place of the Hidden Moon*, p. 69.
94. Narendranarayan Ray Chaudhury, *Samaj-chitra* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1322 B.S.), p. 117; Madhusudan Tattwabachaspati, *Gaudiya Vaishnava Itihas*, pp. 399–402.
95. James Wise, *Notes on the Races*, p. 259.
96. Rohini Kumar Sen, *Bakla*, p. 37; Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangaleer Itihas: Adi Parba* (in Bengali; 3rd edn, Calcutta, 1386 B.S.), p. 296.
97. Kaliprasanna Biswas, *Jatibibaran* (in Bengali; Rangpur, 1319 B.S.), p. 29; *Brahmavaivarttapuranam*, translated into Bengali in verse by Gayaram Batabyal (Calcutta, 1881), p. 475.
98. *Harileelamrita*, p. 24.
99. *Srihari Darshan*, p. 100.
100. *Matua Sangeet*, p. 138.
101. *Achhe dasyu ekjanre, nam tar madan*, *Mahasamkirtan*, p. 74.
102. *Bisuddha prem mahabhabe, ghatbe akam kamana*, *Mahasamkirtan*, p. 50.

103. Anonymous, *Hindu Dharmaniti* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1794 Saka), p. 83.
104. *Matua Sangeet*, p. 35.
105. *Ibid.*, pp. 109–11.
106. *Age jadi jantem ami, eto garal e ramani, Phele giye omni kartem gurur dhyan.*
Ibid., p. 79.
107. See note 64.
108. *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 140, 150, 151; *Harileelamrita*, pp. 292–3; *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, p. 39.
109. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 78–9.
110. *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. vi–vii; *Srihari Darshan*, p. 113.
111. *Matua Sangeet*, pp. 8–9, 51, 60–1, 113, 117, 120–1; *Mahasamkirtan*, p. 75; Aswini Kumar Sarkar, *Sri Sri Hari Sangeet* (in Bengali; 10th edn, Thakurnagar, 1395 B.S.), pp. 18–19, 23.
112. *Hari Sangeet*, pp. 17, 23.
113. *Matua Sangeet*, pp. 51, 78, 113, 117.
114. H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, p. 188.
115. Sashi Kumar Badoi Biswas, *Namasudra Dwija Taitwa* (in Bengali; Barisal, 1317 B.S.), pp. 45, 49, 59; Parbatinath Sarma, *Namasudrachar Chandrika* (in Bengali; Jessore, 1913), pp. 6–9.
116. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 123.
117. Sashi Kumar Badoi Biswas, *Namasudra Dwija Tattwa*, pp. 52–4.
118. *Hari Sangeet*, p. 150; *Matua Sangeet*, p. 101.
119. Rashbehari Ray, *Saral Namasudra Dwija Darpan* (in Bengali; Khulna, 1321 B.S.), p. 37.
120. Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 325.
121. H.H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes*, vol. I, p. 187.
122. 'Some Aspects of Popular Hinduism [Dacca]', File 32 mis.D, Paper no. 26, Diary no. 341, 'Risley Collection', microfilm, Roll no. 6, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
123. Magistrate of Khulna to Commissioner of Presidency Division, 5 June 1911, Government of Bengal, Political (Police) Proceedings, File no. P5R-1, B July 1911, Progs. nos. 326–8, WBSA.
124. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, *Sutyagrahas in Bengal (1921–39)* (Calcutta, 1977), pp. 159–81.
125. Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, p. 14.
126. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
127. Cited in Ramakanta Chakraborti, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, p. 84.
128. *Guruchand-charit*, pp. 442, 569.
129. *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 530.
130. *Guruchand-charit*, pp. 100–2, 108, 564, 569.

131. C.S. Mead, *The Namasudras*, p. 8.
132. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 442.
133. Ibid., pp. 205–6; Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, pp. 36–8.
134. Raicharan Biswas, *Jatiya Jagaran* (in Bengali; Calcutta, 1921), pp. 62–7.
135. For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Social Protest', p. 211.
136. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 262.
137. *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, p. 130.
138. *Guruchand-charit*, pp. 168–76.
139. For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, 'Social Protest', *passim*.
140. *Guruchand-charit*, pp. 174, 414–15, 443.
141. Government of Bengal, Home (Confidential), File nos. 599 of 1930, 597(1–3) of 1930, 345(1–3) of 1931, WBSA; Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, vol. 7, no. 2, 20 February 1922, p. 9.
142. *Guruchand-charit*, p. 146; *Matua Dharma Darshan*, pp. 279–81.
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145. *Matua Dharma-Tattwa-Sar*, pp. 142–3.
146. Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association to the Government of India, 22 September 1932; Secretary, Faridpur District Depressed Classes Association, to Governor General and Viceroy of India, 25 September 1932, Government of India, Reforms Office, File no. 199/R/1932, NAI.
147. For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal, 1872–1937* (Calcutta, 1990), pp. 180–2, appendix IV.
148. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23 February 1938.
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150. Upendranath Barman, *Uttar Banglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti* (in Bengali; Jalpaiguri, 1392 B.S.), p. 74.
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152. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 April 1938.
153. Ibid., 29 July 1938.
154. *Hindustan Standard*, 2 June 1939.
155. *Matua Mahasangher Lakshya O Karmasuchi* (in Bengali; 2nd edn, Thakurnagar, 1394 B.S.), p. 4.
156. *Matua Dharma Darshan*, p. 351.
157. *Matua Mahasangher Lakshya O Karmasuchi*, pp. 8–9, 15.

158. Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, pp. 16–17; *Matua Dharma Darshan*, p. vi.
159. The activities of these organizations have been discussed in more detail in my forthcoming article, 'A Peasant Caste in Protest; The Namasudras of Eastern Bengal, 1872–1945', in *Caste and Communal Politics in South Asia*, ed. Suranjan Das and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta, 1993).
160. Naresh Chandra Das, *Namasudra Sampraday*, p. 17.
161. *Hindustan Standard*, 11 February, 3 April 1938.

Social Suffering and Salvation

The Relevance of *The Buddha and His Dhamma**

V. GEETHA

Introduction: The Importance of Dhamma

When Dr Ambedkar announced in 1935 that though born a Hindu he would not die as one, he expressed a deeply-felt intent to turn away from and reject Hinduism. This intent was acutely and incisively argued out for the rest of the decade, as he cast about for spiritual choices that dalits might yet make. During this time, his anger against Hinduism was palpable, and occasioned as much by the political disappointment and consequent angst he experienced in the wake of his signing of the Poona Pact, as it was by his lifelong impatience with Hindu dharma. In fact, while reviewing various conversion options available to him he measured each in terms of its willingness to honour dalit political claims. However, when he returned to the question of conversion in the late 1940s, he had shifted ground—it was not so much political concerns that directed his interest; rather he appeared keen on expounding a new metaphysics, and one that was adequate to the needs and conditions of modern life. When he did convert a decade later, he had come full circle. Angry and hurt by his experiences in the legislature over the issue of the Hindu Code Bill that he had framed and which was a cherished

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piece of legislation, aiming as it did at a codification of Hindu law, he made a decision that he had long been contemplating—and converted, along with lakhs of his followers, to Buddhism, which he rechristened as ‘navayana’, the new path. In Buddhism, as his *Buddhism and His Dhamma* makes clear, he had found a rational, elegant, and aesthetically fulfilling worldview, an ethos that was the very antithesis of the world of caste and the inequalities it mandated. This ethos was not only liberating, but also signified an ethics that would be the basis for a new politics, a new just and equal social order.

Dr Ambedkar’s journey to Buddhism may be read in any number of ways and has been since the day of his conversion. But whatever the meanings that we attach to the act of conversion, and howsoever we read his attempt to rethink Buddhism for our times, it is clear that his conversion had to do with political, ethical, and spiritual concerns: in fact these were inextricably linked in his understanding of an ideal social existence, both in an individual and collective sense. This is not entirely surprising. For long, he had been wary of and uneasy with that other great exponent of ethics in the context of politics, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi’s characteristic linking of politics and piety bothered him, especially the Mahatma’s rhetoric of faith, his insistence on heeding his ineffable ‘inner voice’, which he claimed guided him in his darkest moments. Dr Ambedkar had no use for such a voice or the God that mandated it—as his lovely epigraph to *What Congress and Gandhi Did to the Untouchables* has it, he wanted a world without God, but one in which men may yet be mindful of each other. The life of the Buddha appeared exemplary in this respect—as much as his persona, the ethics he taught and practised, and which he enjoined unto others, appealed to Dr Ambedkar’s mind and consciousness. To Gandhi’s God, Dr Ambedkar counterposed the Buddha.

It seems to me that this traversing between the realms of faith on the one hand and ethics on the other, which Dr Ambedkar undertook with great earnestness, helped him measure and define the political realm as a radical, republican space. His conversion suggests we abide by a secularism that is anchored not so much in a separation of realms and powers, but in the unifying field of a universal ethics.

In what follows I shall map Dr Ambedkar’s *navayana* as a path and a place, an anticipation of utopia. I hope to do this by reading his conversion in terms of another less momentous yet significant conversion—of that other great modern Buddhist of our time, Pandit

Iyothee Thass, who accepted *dhiksha* in the late nineteenth century. As committed to re-examining the ethical basis of our social life, Iyothee Thass nevertheless was concerned with the cultural history of Buddhism, in a way that Dr Ambedkar was not, and this contrasting response to the salience of the Buddha's life and times should help us situate the political acuity that marks Dr Ambedkar's interest in the *dhamma*.

Dhamma, History, and Culture: Iyothee Thass' Adi-vedam

The importance of Buddhist ethics for our times was urged by several people in late colonial India. Beset with anxiety and hope in the face of an inevitable modernity that threatened to turn over all that was familiar and usher in a new world, anticipating the fulfilment of promises held out by European political liberalism and later by socialism, and troubled by the unregenerate nature of an unequal and cruel social order, several men turned to Buddhism to guide them in their search for a brave new world. For many of them, Buddhism seemed a fit response to the dilemmas of modernity—it appeared to adopt a rational disposition towards human affairs even as it counselled a creed of non-desire. Further, it was not inimical to notions of equality and liberty, social justice and fraternity, and it endorsed active acts of compassion and understanding towards fellow beings, including the non-human. Most important, Buddhism was not abstract in the least, it was not concerned with the epistemology of suffering and sorrow; rather it wished to address their cessation, suggest ways of staving off the inevitable despair that attends a heart wretchedly given over to insatiable want and greed.

Of all those who turned to Buddhism to illumine their sense of a flawed social world they desired to mend, Pandit Iyothee Thass was somewhat unique. A dalit *siddha* medicine-man by training and a Tamil scholar, he converted to Buddhism in the late nineteenth century and thereafter wrote extensively on his new faith, annotating its meanings for the newly initiated as well as for those future generations that might want to adopt Buddhism as their religion. Arguing as Dr Ambedkar would later, in *Who are the Untouchables*, Iyothee Thass made a case for untouchables as former and original Buddhists who had been exiled out of the social order since their faith offended and challenged

varnadharma, especially the prerogatives of Brahmins, and their claims to spiritual authority. He worked out an entire mythos of meanings which drew on Tamil literary texts to explicate the wilful denigration of Buddhism and Buddhists down the ages.

This fabulous attempt at re-reading Tamil texts reached its fruition in his magisterial *Adi-vedam*, which recounted the life of the Buddha in great detail. Iyothée Thass appears to have been familiar with the Pali canon as well as the Sanskrit *Buddhacharita*, and, being a medicine-man, was steeped in the lore of healing. He put the hermeneutics of Tamil linguistic scholarship to good use, as he set himself the task of reworking the Buddha's life story within a recognizably Tamil discursive universe. He prised apart words to situate them in new and unexpected semantic contexts, re-read, rather audaciously, the meanings of Hindu holy names and famous *puranic* tales to render them adequate to the needs of his new faith, and assimilated well-known non-Hindu religious texts, such as the Mosaic laws and commandments, as well as the New Testament, to the wisdom of the Buddha. Drawing on words and terms from the *siddha* healing tradition, he offered sophisticated glosses on desire, pleasure, despair, lightness, and freedom, linking together somatic and mental states. His account of the Buddha's life turned out to be vast and encyclopaedic—almost as if he wished to create an *ur-text*, comprising different narratives, registers, and histories. In all this, though, he did not lose sight of his intent—to present the Buddha's worldview and creed as apposite for our times, especially for dalits.

Iyothée Thass' attempts to rework Buddhism for a Tamil context were of a part with his efforts to secure political rights for dalits within the colonial scheme of things. He tried to interest the Madras chapter of the Indian National Congress in the plight of the *panchamas*, as dalits were referred to then. He also petitioned the colonial government, seeking succour for dalits who faced systematic and everyday discrimination, humiliation, and abuse. *Tamizhan*, the Tamil weekly that he edited, carried detailed news of dalit lives, the problems they endured in their work contexts, public spaces, and in their quest for education and dignity. Iyothée Thass also keenly followed the social reform debates of his time and reported on the linguistic biases, cultural predispositions, and social attitudes evident in caste Hindu responses to dalits and their claims. His account of caste society, Brahmin arrogance, and upper-caste disdain for those lower in

the social ladder comprised a secular indictment of inequality and injustice. This, on the one hand; on the other hand, he consistently called an emergent nationalism to account, doubting its representative claims and wondering if it, indeed, had the commonweal in mind. For Iyothée Thass, sceptical as he was of nationalism, the colonial state represented a form of justice that was kinder to dalits and he trusted its offices than he did nationalist good intentions and the reform claims of caste Hindu society.

Though he wrote and declaimed against nationalism and its agents, Iyothée Thass did not imagine untouchability and the caste order could be effectively addressed within the discursive limits set by the former. Necessary as it was to abide by those limits and stake dalit claims on the terrain that they were being denied, he yet looked to other interpretative spaces to articulate his case for equality and justice. Scripture and literature on the one hand and Tamil literary history on the other were cited and invoked to redeem and transform the present. In the event he ended up writing a new social and cultural history—of Tamil Buddhism—that dalits could claim to be their own. This history in turn became a scaffold for the present to rest its burden and secure its future. In this sense, Buddhism was not to be a return of the previous, but also a sign of the possible. It represented a spiritual ethos that seemed absolutely indispensable to the fulfilment of secular ideals.

Fashioned in and through references to Tamil literary and religious texts, Iyothée Thass' Buddhism yet abided by core Buddhist tenets. Thus, he accepted the importance of desire and the reality of suffering (*dhukka*) but unlike Ambedkar he did not seek to reinterpret the latter as 'social suffering'. *Dhukka* for Iyothée Thass remained an existential idea, and one that was grounded in bodily experiences. *Dhukka* was graspable, given the mind's agility, its power of discernment. Iyothée Thass was drawn to the Buddha's appeal to reason and argued passionately that the mind was real and responsible for our actions; that our thoughts make us, as they do our acts. Neither fate, nor the status that attends birth, neither gods nor their attendants was as decisive as the human mind. However, bodily and mental acts were not entirely independent of each other.

Being the healer that he was and familiar with a tradition that linked somatic and mental states, Iyothée Thass described quite vividly the complex relationship between the two sets of acts. Bodily acts,

he argued, governed as they are by the senses, leave their impress on the mind, such that good acts produce favourable mental states; likewise, the mind's movement, oriented towards good (or bad) gets inscribed on the body, producing as it were love or avarice, enabling self-knowledge or fostering (wrongful) desire and illusion, as the case may be (Iyothée Thass, in G. Aloysius, 1999: 226).

For Iyothée Thass, the self-validating nature of body and mind, the illusory world that they created could only be broken through an awareness of suffering. Such awareness, however, is neither physical nor mental. It is contingent on the recognition of the relationship that the *dhukka*-ridden self has with the world, with others. In Iyothée Thass' version of the famous episode of the prince Siddhartha saving a bird from being hunted by his cousin Devadutta, he has the former asking the latter if he would not feel pain were an arrow to pierce him and in fact pierces the said arrow back into Devadutta's palm to demonstrate that Devadutta was as vulnerable to hurt as the bird. He entreats his cousin to act on this sense of hurt, and help heal the bird. Then again, while watching workers labour in the fields, Siddhartha feels their effort as his own, and when, finally he chances upon age, illness, and death, he imagines his own body, subject to such torments, and realizes how he would not want to endure decay and mortality (ibid.: 197–8).

In Thass' reading, this ability to see oneself as equally vulnerable as those one harms through word or deed, and as subject to pain and death as other human beings, is hugely significant, and on it hinges the possibility or otherwise of self-knowledge and salvation.

The path to the latter required an active remaking of one's phenomenal and mental life. The *Adi-vedam* insisted that one cleansed body and soul, and constantly worked through one's consciousness. How was this to be done? Firstly, it was important to come to terms with the fleeting nature of intense emotional and mental states, realize that nothing lasts and that immediate fulfilment of a want or gratification of a need only conceals an eternal hunger that must be addressed, recognized for what it is, a condition that is excitable and not to be easily rested. The thing then would be to acknowledge the burden of this condition, and work to relieve oneself of the pain, the *dhukka* it causes. What must not be done, or even if done, would prove unfruitful is vain questioning—attempting to find out if this sorrowing world is unreal, real, inconstant, or eternal, if death is indeed all,

or if life persists after death. For these questions pre-empt us asking questions about ourselves, about what each of us needs to do to live with and yet not be ensnared in suffering (*ibid.*: 245, 249).

Secondly, it was imperative that a person cleansed his or her mind of the stain of difference, of that which makes us want to love, hate, enslave, control others. Iyothee Thass understood inequality and violence to be functions of this difference that we nurture in our hearts, out of ignorance, bound as we are often to the fulfilment of our own desires and needs. In place of difference, one ought to learn to see how all living things are linked, bound to each other. For, it is this reciprocity that helps to cut the knot of desire, of that profound self-love which fosters want. Recounting the story of a killer of animals who comes to heed the Buddha's words, Iyothee Thass pointed to how he not only gave up violence, but took to active loving and caring—in other words, mindfulness towards others came to replace that sense of difference which pushed him the murderer to passionate hate, in the first place (*ibid.*: 286).

Mindfulness, however, was a state of existence, contingent on both enlightenment as well as right action. On the one hand, mindfulness had to be achieved as an active mental state: 'when you realize that you can breathe evenly, when you learn to be mindful of your body, you also learn to be mindful of the bodies of others, you realize too that their bodies, like one's own will suffer, endure, die, and that what is steady, what survives is not this or that identity, neither man nor woman, not the self, or the non-self that is outside it, and this would lead to non-attachment, to being in the world, but not desiring, wanting, longing . . . only mindful . . .' (*ibid.*: 325–6). On the other hand, mindfulness demanded that one actively chose compassion: 'whereas a bird or animal can only protect its own, and not others, men ought to extend compassion towards all and not just their own kind . . . but this can only come from individual effort, from the discretion that separates good from bad, hurt from care . . .' (*ibid.*: 281).

Unsurprisingly, in Iyothee Thass' lexicon, feeding the hungry and ministering to the sick become important virtues—emptied of want and unexcited by desire, a human person does not suffer self-abnegation; nor is she rendered empty and alienated; rather she is filled with the desire to heal and do good. Iyothee Thass envisioned good deeds, compassionate acts as setting up a reciprocal cycle of

compassionate deeds. Writing of the Buddha helping a herdsman with his goats, Iyothée Thass pointed out that at the time the selfsame herdsman brought the Buddha milk when the latter had almost starved to death, the Buddha realized that his earlier good deed had earned him this respite from hunger (ibid.: 220).

The most complete expression of compassion for Iyothée Thass was an empathy that embraced the entire living world. He accorded the highest value to *jeevakarunya*, to limitless compassion in the most expansive sense of the term. *Jeevakarunya* in fact is the burden of his *Adi-vedam*, and figures as the most superior of virtues in his discussions of the five landscapes of ancient Tamil literature. Suggesting that the Buddha succeeded in converting the populations of these five landscapes, Iyothée Thass has the Buddha counsel *ahimsa* (non-violence) to one and all, including fishermen and hunters. These latter are enjoined to learn the art of exchange in place of killing: thus the *kuravas* or hunters are asked to eschew killing animals and birds, since that would interfere with their karmic journey towards liberation, and instead take to exchanging the wealth of the forests, ivory, and so on, for food. Likewise, Iyothée Thass has the Buddha counsel fisherfolk to take to pearl-diving instead of fishing—the Buddha wonders if they would like to be caught with bait, even as fish are caught, whereupon the fishermen are shocked, and agree to his counsel (ibid.: 383–9).

Interestingly, for Iyothée Thass, productive labour signified value, and he counterposed it to killing and violence—his Buddha heralds the arrival of grain cultivation and animal husbandry in the Tamil valleys and pastureland.

Iyothée Thass' Buddha, then, recognized the reality of suffering through the experience of empathy, and this leads him to discard the sting of difference and uphold the reciprocal nature of all relationships. However, this does not mean that he eschews differences, or wishes to sublimate them in an abstract and characterless *Brahman*; mindfulness and compassion are to be exercised in relationship to the world, rather than made aspects of a meditative exercise meant to elevate the self.

What is curious though about Iyothée Thass' Buddhism is the place it accorded women—and in this instance it does not square easily with the secular values it otherwise admirably assimilates and transmutes. The *dhamma* of a woman, Iyothée Thass made clear, lies in her deferring to her husband, in observing the vow of chastity,

attending to her household duties, and in anticipating her husband's needs. Further, she is to make sure that he does not swerve from the *dhamma*—that is, should he drink or lust after women it was her duty to reform him and return him to the path. In Iyothee Thass' version of the Buddha's first lay conversion, we have him defining male and female natures as essentially different; the former, notes the Buddha, is given to protecting others, the latter is the object of an other's lust; the former is brave, virile, the latter given to ignorance. Given this, it was important for women to be modest, steadfast, and rightly fearful of their reputation. Iyothee Thass also has the Buddha counsel the merchant's wife—amongst these early lay converts—that women who take to the *dhamma* must not look at, seek out, or be around other men. Further, in their husbands' absence they ought to learn to run their households with a sufficient sense of awe of their husbands' ultimate authority. They also had to learn to be happy with whatever food and raiment the husband provided, and not seek more than what was available (ibid.: 277–8).

Thus, we see Iyothee Thass refiguring *dhamma* for women in fairly predictable and conventional terms. This is not entirely surprising. Jaina and Buddhist literature in Tamil, for the most part, urge a chaste, virtuous life for women, and besides, insistently warn against the 'wiles' of womanhood. This sense of women's *dhamma* however sits contrarily with the rest of Thass' metaphysics. For instance, in his discursive universe, the man–woman dyad is not merely a reflection of gender arrangements; rather it figures as an epistemic detail. His Buddha, when discussing the reality of *dhukka*, notes that everything has its other; men and women, good and bad, night and day, sleep and wakefulness are all paired opposites, and thus must it be with *dhukka*, it has to be viewed in relationship to its other, bliss. However, since *nibanna* requires the annulment of difference, or rather a mindfulness that is not provoked by difference, *nibanna* ultimately does not heed sexual differences, and it is irrelevant whether one is a man or a woman.

We are thus confronted with a familiar paradox: in the context of *nibanna*, sexual difference is immaterial, but the path to *nibanna* is constitutively gendered! Sexual identity thus precedes every other kind of identity, remaining relatively constant, and suffering little change even within the terms of a radical spiritual ethos.

Unsurprisingly, each of the values that Iyothee Thass sought to uphold was antithetical to the spirit of the caste system, of the *varna* order, that disallowed empathy, except in a very limited sense (for instance, towards one's own kind); which affirmed and arranged differences in a hierarchy, refusing thus the possibility of reciprocity; and which valued limitless compassion only in the relationship of human beings and gods. Further, the caste system has no use for mindfulness, indeed it prefers that the mind not exercise its powers of reason or discretion, and beguiles it often with the notion of a menacing destiny.

By rejecting the ethos of the caste order, and suggesting instead a worldview at once mythic, somatic, philosophical and ethical, Iyothee Thass created a distinctive cosmology, one that leavened the secular discourse of rights, claims and justice that he had recourse to in his everyday context.

Rich, insightful, poetic, and poignant as it is, the *Adi-vedam*, on account of the *ur*-status it claimed for itself, is also unmistakably tendentious and fantastic. Though its ethical core is crucially dependent on its sense of social anger and justice, it is overlaid with textual readings that sometimes obscure what they ought to illuminate. Thus, Iyothee Thass' acute sense of the social world, of the reality of social suffering, gets absorbed into a semantic (and literary) field that is not consistently linked to the secular world outside of itself. This is most evident in his exposition of the *dhamma* for women, where older and established literary and cultural tropes negotiate his radical spirituality rather decisively.

Dr Ambedkar, writing at a later point in time, and after his faith in liberal political philosophy had been considerably shaken—not accidentally over the question of women's rights, as envisioned by him in the Hindu Code Bill—imagined a different future for the new ethics he publicly embraced when he converted to Buddhism. He insisted on the necessity of such an ethics, not merely because it would redeem an earlier and sadly limited political liberalism but also because it would mandate into existence a new politics, in fact, cause it to emerge. His conversion as well as the views he outlines in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* bear witness to this.

Whereas Iyothee Thass' conversion to Buddhism was mediated in

and through a search for identity and history, Dr Ambedkar's conversion happened after his several efforts at creating the conditions for an equal and just social order came up against social and economic indifference. His representation of Buddhism thus provides an interesting contrast to Thass': unlike *Adi-vedam*, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is not an *ur-text*. It is not interested in rendering Buddhism an index of a distinctive culture and one that had been exiled by brahminical cunning. Rather, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is a thoroughly historical text, bearing the marks of its author's lifelong struggle for social and cultural justice. Dr Ambedkar built this struggle into his narrative: his rejection of god and godliness, self-abnegation and the virtue that attaches to it, his impatience with clever doctrine and cleverer sophistry, his conscious inclusion of the socially excluded in every instance within the fold of the *dhamma*, pitiless rejection of birth-based and other privileges, self-conscious assertion of women's equality, in both material and spiritual matters, and finally his affirmation of *maitri* or loving kindness, which goes beyond compassion and implies universal fellowship in the widest sense of the word—all of these replay arguments he had earlier deployed in diverse political contexts. The secular and the sacred, the political and the ethical thus come to inform each other in very complex ways, and this contrasts with the fate of the secular in Iyothée Thass' work and times, captive as it was to the seductions of literary exegesis on the one hand, and the 'goodwill' of the colonial state on the other.

Turning to *Dhamma*: The Ethics and Politics of Fraternity

Dr Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 ended a lifelong struggle he had waged with Hinduism and the Hindu social order. From early on in his public life, he had wrestled with the question of spiritual relevance and sought to rethink Hinduism, from the point of view of dignity, compassion, and justice. Tukaram's matchless verse and Ramanuja's all-encompassing theology of love and liberation held his interest during this time. However, he found no spiritual or social solace in these devotional traditions. Further, in the public world that he worked in, he experienced such rancour and prejudice that

drawing on catholic traditions of worship appeared futile—though they were dissenting traditions in their own time and place, in the modern present, they were clearly not capable of forcing caste Hindu consciousness into a re-examination of itself, or relive in the present its past moments of rupture.

During the late 1920s, he and his fellow dalits in Maharashtra initiated several civic struggles in the course of which, as during the Parvathi temple satyagraha, they laid claims to temple spaces, on the basis that these were public and hence potentially open to all. These struggles may be read as initiatives that desired to refigure sacral space rendering it open and limitless and, in the process, configuring a new civics, at once secular and sacred—sacred, on account of the privileges it decried in the name of a common spirituality (the notion that a God, if indeed he or she as such will not observe differences), and secular on account of its refusal of the salience of sacred custom and habit.

More expansively, this sense of a world that did not heed rules of access, based on birth, ascriptive status, and custom, but which could be claimed by one and all, in terms of a covenant that human beings make with one another, was one that Dr Ambedkar deeply cherished. It was also one that informed his understanding of equality, justice, and liberty. In an essay titled 'The Hindu Social Order' he noted that the Hindu social order was inimical to equality and fraternity. This spirit of fraternity, he noted, was expressed with poignancy by the Pilgrim Fathers, who, landing at Plymouth, invoked the grace of God that had brought them safely, and also helped them forge a covenant with each other, in His name, 'by virtue of which we hold ourselves tied to all, care of each others' good and of the whole' (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Volume 3, 1987: 97).

Such a covenant, though, was virtually impossible in the context of the Hindu social order, because it refused, in fact insisted that it would disallow mutuality and reciprocity. Elsewhere, in *The Annihilation of Caste*, Dr Ambedkar famously noted that the Hindu has no public, and that his public was his caste. In the absence of 'social endosmosis' which makes it possible for classes to hold values in common, and share an extensive number of common interests, undertakings, and expenses, Hindu society had actively nurtured isolation and exclusiveness. Dr Ambedkar went on to note that the absence of fraternity was a founded absence, based on a rigid economics which disallowed

learning to many, condemned them to servitude, and forbade occupational mobility to all. Further, the caste system was not merely one that encouraged a division of labour, thereby rendering all forms of labour traditional and hidebound, but also a system that divided labourers. This vertical division of the working classes meant they could not hope to unite across caste lines to challenge an unequal economic and social order (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Volume 1, 1979: 47–8) .

The impossibility of fraternity in every sense of the word ought to be evident, argued Ambedkar, in the spiritual sanction it received—it was not merely the letter of faith that insisted on this, but its spirit as well. In other words, it was not so much misapplied doctrine as reformers would have it which was responsible for this state of things, but the doctrine itself that disallowed what Dr Ambedkar so valued—a world ‘when there is free play back and forth, (and classes) have an equal opportunity to receive and take from others’ Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Volume 3: 113). He observed that religions across the world have consecrated inanimate and living creatures, the natural world, but only Hinduism had dared consecrate a particular social order and made it sacred. ‘The Hindus are the only people in the world whose social order—the relation of man to man is consecrated by religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate. The Hindus are the only people in the world whose economic order—the relation of workman to workman is consecrated by religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate’ (ibid.: 128).

Clearly, Dr Ambedkar did not imagine that a reformed Hinduism was possible or even desirable. His quarrel with Gandhi must also be understood in this context. Gandhi’s desire to retain dalits within the Hindu fold appeared to him particularly perverse. He was annoyed too by the manner in which Gandhi brought God into his arguments—for instance in the matter of the separate electorates that the British wished to award dalits, Gandhi, heeding his voice of conscience, or the voice of God, as he called it, undertook a fast unto death to protest the separation of dalits from the rest of the Hindus (*sic*). As far as Dr Ambedkar was concerned, this matter of the electorates had everything to do with how men dealt with each other, and not what God meant Gandhi or anyone else to undertake. Even if it was indeed the case that Gandhi felt the guiding hand of God, it was not a choice

that Dr Ambedkar could bring himself to endorse, as he made clear in the epigraph he attached to his book, *What Gandhi and Congress Did to the Untouchables*, written thirteen years after the signing of the Poona Pact had 'settled' the question of electorates and helped retain dalits within Hinduism. This settlement tasted sour for Dr Ambedkar, since he felt, rightly, that Gandhi had forced it on him and the dalits by going on his so-called epic fast. Not surprisingly, in the epigraph he insisted that a modern world was one where God (and by extension, his apostles) could have no place, and, as his argument in the book makes clear, in the case of the Hindu social order, to bring in God and invoke the sanctities of faith and identity could only further affirm dalits in their low and humiliating status. Significantly, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he explicitly describes the *dhamma* thus: 'The centre of his (the Buddha's) *Dhamma* is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth' (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, volume 11, 1992: 121).

Not accidentally, then, Dr Ambedkar returned to reviewing the role of religion in Hindu life during this period (1930s), and declared three years after Gandhi's fast that he would not die a Hindu. His announcement was not meant only in a strategic sense—the manner in which Gandhi's 'epic fast' brought the sacred to bear upon the world of civics, of social relationships, perhaps made him want to rethink the sacred, in terms of a transformed civic order. He realized, too, the limits to Hindu social reform, and did not imagine dalits could expect anything more from that faith. Yet, during this time, his publicly-expressed ideas on faith appeared strategic than anything else. For one, as he listed the advantages and disadvantages of dalits converting to Christianity, Islam, or Sikhism, he weighed these in terms of what dalits could expect from each of these communities of the faithful, both by way of social support as well as political and other safeguards and concessions. He also seemed to want to make a choice that would allow him to retain a sense of national as opposed to an alien identity. Buddhism, though on his mind, did not figure during the mid-1930s as a possible option.

But cutting through this strategic reasoning was another impulse: the desire to found collective life on a different ethical and spiritual basis. As he noted in a speech delivered at the Mahar conference in Bombay in 1936, a few months after he had announced his decision to convert:

A religion in which man's human behaviour with man is prohibited, is not religion, but a display of force. A religion which does not recognise a man as man, is not a religion but a disease. A religion in which the touch of animals is permitted, but the touch of human beings is prohibited, is not a religion but a mockery. A religion which precludes some classes from education, forbids them to accumulate wealth and to bear arms, is not a religion but a mockery of human beings. A religion that compels the ignorant to be ignorant, and the poor to be poor, is not a religion but a punishment. (Speech delivered by Dr Ambedkar to the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference, 31st May 1936, Bombay)

Dr Ambedkar made it clear in the course of this speech that all other religions were far more humane than Hinduism in this respect. Tragically, leaders and spokesmen of these various religions were less than sanguine about his decision to leave Hinduism. Some amongst the Christian leaders wondered whether, if Dr Ambedkar indeed did convert with his followers to their faith, it would constitute a genuine change of heart, or remain an instrumental act. They were also not quite sure of how the entry of a substantially large number of dalits into their fold would affect caste relationships amongst the faithful (Christophe Jaffrelot, 2005: 123).

Islamic leaders, while cautiously welcoming of his decision to abdicate his Hindu identity, were nevertheless worried that if their numbers grew with the entry of dalits, whether they would be able to retain their minority status in the polity, and if therefore they would not be rendered more vulnerable. The Sikhs held their premises open and were willing for dalits to retain whatever safeguards they enjoyed at present, even after conversion. But two things bothered Dr Ambedkar: the British government was not willing to extend political and other concessions they had granted the Sikhs to the would-be converts, and besides, and more seriously, he had occasion to learn of the incipient casteism in the community from dalit Sikh converts (ibid.: 127).

The hesitation that greeted Dr Ambedkar's decision to convert may be viewed as symptomatic of that refusal of fraternity, which so grieved him. The Hindus were open about this. Hindu Mahasabha leaders suggested that he form a sect of his own rather than seek to convert. Mahasabha leaders and later those in the Indian National Congress also persuaded other leading dalit leaders—M.C. Raja, R. Srinivasan, Rajbhoj, and Jagjivan Ram—to distance themselves from his decision to leave the Hindu fold (ibid.: 125–9).

In any case Dr Ambedkar himself was not ready to make a decision yet. He was ready to convert, but was also biding his time, and wondering if he could carry the dalits with him in all instances. He was drawn to the spirit of the Gospels and the comradeship that Christianity was capable of, but was convinced that Indian Christians were not fraternal enough and would not worry about their dalit brethren (Christopher Queen 1996: 53). He wondered if Islam was a good choice after all, since he felt the faithful capable of great intolerance and violence. The Buddhists were open to him, but he had not yet decided if that was an option that would suit his needs. Yet he valued the freedom that the Buddha granted the human mind.

In his speech to the Mahars, to which I have referred above, he drew on the Buddha's famous words from the *Mahaparinibbanasutta* to underscore his argument about conversion: that it must be a deliberate choice, and not one that a person makes in haste or blindly. On being asked for a message before he passed on, the Buddha had pointed out to Ananda, his dear disciple: 'I have preached the *Dhamma* with an open heart, without concealing anything. The Tathagata [Buddha] has not kept anything concealed, as some other teachers do. So Ananda, what more can I tell to the Bhikkhu Sangh? So Ananda, be self-illuminating like the lamp. Don't be dependent for light, like the Earth. Don't be a satellite. Be a light unto thyself. Believe in Self. Don't be dependent on Others. Be truthful. Always take refuge in the Truth, and do not surrender to anybody!'

Quoting the Buddha thus, Dr Ambedkar concluded his address on this note: 'I also take your leave in the words of the Buddha. "Be your own guide. Take refuge in reason. Do not listen to the advice of others. Do not succumb to others. Be truthful. Take refuge in truth. Never surrender to anybody!" If you keep in mind this message of Lord Buddha at this juncture, I am sure your decision will not be wrong' (ibid.).

These words notwithstanding, the decade of the 1930s did not see him do anything decisive with respect to conversion. But it is surely significant that he founded the Independent Labour Party during this period, almost as if he wished to fashion fraternity entirely within the terms of civic life. Here, again, his wanting to forge unity between dalit and Sudra workers proved to be an elusive goal. As he argued in *The Annihilation of Caste*, labourers were divided by caste, and proletarian

unity was not easy to achieve. The early 1940s saw him busy with other matters, of administration and rule, and he returned to the question of conversion only later in the decade. In 1942 he had set up the Scheduled Castes Federation, but the electoral and political fortunes of that body did not bode well in the face of determined Congress hostility to his politics in Maharashtra. His disappointment at the hustings and the fact that he had to be nominated to the Constituent Assembly from Kolkata convinced him, perhaps, of the futility of that kind of political identity and labour.

Yet all this time he kept up his interest in matters other than the political. For one, he continued to read widely, and seemed to have been increasingly preoccupied with Buddhism. In 1948, in a preface that he wrote to an early modern text on Buddhism, P. Lakshminarasu's *The Essence of Buddhism*, he observed rather pointedly that, in upholding the importance of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Lakshminarasu, "fought European arrogance with patriotic fervour, orthodox Hinduism with iconoclastic zeal, heterodox Brahmins with nationalist vision and aggressive Christianity with a rationalist outlook—all under the inspiring banner of his unflagging faith in the teachings of the Great Buddha" (quoted in Queen: 54). The Buddha engaged his attention thereafter too, as is clear from an unfinished note on *Buddhism and its Social Role* (subsequently published in Volume 3 of the Collected Works). Dalit followers in Maharashtra in the 1940s too gestured towards Buddhism, even as they made their antipathy to Hinduism public. In 1950 he visited Sri Lanka and met the Lankan monks but found that, in spite of an ancient monastic tradition, they did not appear to be particularly interested in the commonweal, and spoke of the virtues of outreach and sacrifice instead of fellowship. In 1951 he wrote an article for the journal of the Mahabodhi Society arguing that Buddhism was essential to save the modern world and that it was particularly apposite to the latter's needs and ways. He noted that societies function either on the basis of law or morality, otherwise societies cease to exist. Morality is often closely linked to religion, but in these modern times an ideal moral code ought to be in consonance with reason and recognize the universal validity of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Further, neither morality nor religion ought to make a virtue out of poverty (Dhananjay Keer 1990: 420–1).

The 1950s were difficult years for him. He laboured long and hard

over the Hindu Code Bill but realized that this radical legislation that potentially could recast Hindu custom and practice was not likely to be passed. 'The Hindu Code was the greatest social reform measure ever undertaken by the legislature in this country. No law passed by the Indian Legislature in the past or likely to be passed in the future can be compared to it in point of its significance. To leave inequality between class and class, between sex and sex, which is the soul of Hindu Society untouched and to go on passing legislation relating to economic problems is to make a farce of our Constitution and to build a palace on a dung heap. This is the significance I attach(ed) to the Hindu Code' (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Volume 14, 1995: 1325-6).

Prime Minister Nehru's equivocation with regard to the Bill hurt and depressed Dr Ambedkar and once it became clear that the Bill would not be passed in the form he had envisaged for it, he resigned from the Cabinet (1951). The heartache and sorrow that his time in the Cabinet caused him and the manner in which his boldest attempt at reformed legislation was stymied perhaps brought home to him the limits of that political liberalism he had valued and upheld all his life. The rule of law, the guarantees that progressive legislation could offer the country's poor and marginal people, democratic protocols that would ensure that archaic forms of authority, based on caste or class interest would not prove determinate—these ideals came apart for him as is clear from the text of his resignation speech. His turn to Buddhism must be viewed in this context as well.

In 1954, while dedicating a Buddha *vihara*, he announced his decision to convert to Buddhism, and also of the book that he was working on, on the Buddha's life. In 1956, he and his fellow dalits converted in a massive public ceremony in Nagpur and the following year his *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was published.

During the 1950s, Ambedkar's interest in Buddhism was inspired not so much by his anger over Hinduism, which he still retained; it was instead subsumed in a broader intention, his desire to create an enduring basis for genuine fraternity and equality. This time around, he would do it not through seeking allies, for that could well prove opportune; or through legal arrangements, which in the final analysis are workable only through the exercise of a radical political will and which in the Indian context was seldom consistent; but

through insisting on a radical ethics. This ethics in turn would hinge on people adopting new ways of living, thinking and acting, both towards themselves and others. It is in this context that he turned to Buddhism. As he had noted in his 1951 article, this was not a religion of the book, nor was the Buddha a God—its rationalism, ethics and subtle poetry appealed to him.

The manner in which he made this poetry speak to his needs is the subject of the last section of this essay.

Sadhamma as Universal Ethics: Dr Ambedkar's Anticipation of Utopia

Among other things, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* may be read as an incipient critique of the modern, democratic state. As Dr Ambedkar noted in his resignation speech, the state cannot hope to exist thus, making laws and building institutions on a social dung heap. The relationship of state to society thus stood to be altered. Until the mid-1950s, Dr Ambedkar had imagined he could do this by making the state answer radical social needs, but that decade brought to him, like the 1930s had, in a different sense, that these needs were seldom recognized as such by the social world that gave birth to them. Political fiat and democratic labour could not hope to do much in this regard either, since political institutions and people's representatives were themselves not entirely convinced of the need to reform law and society. The rule of the majority, the basis for democratic politics, was deeply problematic in the Indian context, since caste Hindus, who were likely to assert their resistance to any and every kind of radical reform, would remain, at all times, a permanent political majority. He had attempted to work against the tyranny of such a majority, but the safeguards he sought in this respect were not granted—separate electorates for dalits, for one. His decision to opt out of this polity then must be taken seriously for what it tells us about the political realm—that it is at best limited, and at worst, a deception of the poor and the unfortunate in a context of endemic social injustice.

The Buddha and His Dhamma, however, is not an argument against political action or intervention; rather it seeks to redefine the political in and through ethical and spiritual concerns and practices. It demonstrates through the life of the Buddha the nature of the ethical life,

and the choices that confront one, committed to equality, justice, and fraternity.

Much has been written about how Dr Ambedkar worked with various traditions of Buddhist scholarship—the *Buddhacharitra*, the Pali canon, and early Western interpretations of the Buddha's life and times—all of which he read, annotated, glossed, rejected, substituted, and changed in important ways. A scornful early reviewer described him as simplifying the Buddha's life into a message for modern times. Others have since read his effort differently, discerning in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* a careful coding of the Buddha's life as one given over to rationalism and thinking about the greater common good; or as exemplifying a new, socially responsive Buddhism, which takes the ending of suffering to mean the ending of oppression as well, and the dawn of justice and equality. Yet others have attempted to identify the metaphysical core of his assumed faith, its aesthetics, and its purported ethics.

What is evident in all accounts is the distinctive edge he brought to his understanding of Buddhism. For one, he set out to define *dhukka*, not only in terms of the self-consuming desire or want that produces it, but also as social suffering caused by acts trained by the powerful and the unethical against the powerless. He did not obviously want to make dalits responsible for what ailed them, at the same time he was not unaware of the power of want and desire. What he does then is to impute want and desire to those that are overwhelmed by avarice and anger, and are therefore unable to act right—in his semantic universe, desire is as much *loba* or greed, and as likely as indulgence to cause *dhukka*. While glossing the famous scene of the Buddha watching labourers plough, Dr Ambedkar has him sorrowing at the fact that while the toiler toils, the master lives on the fruits of the toiler's labour (Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Volume 11, 1992: 10). This, in his lexicon, is *loba*. Significantly, as I have shown above, the pain of labour, in Iyothée Thass, instils empathy, an awareness of a common mortality; in Dr Ambedkar though, it indicates a situation of inequality born out of greed and avarice. *Loba*, when accompanied by *kroda*, or anger and hatred, compounds the misery caused by want and produces endless strife (ibid.: 235). In redefining conflict, pain, and sorrow Dr Ambedkar retains the Buddhist view of desire as causing delusion and compromising the integrity of the self, but distinguishes false

consciousness or illusory thought from illusion-producing emotions. In his discourse, *moha* clouds the mind, whereas *loba* and *kroda* work on the emotions. Mindfulness is therefore all, and capable of curing delusion and craving (ibid.: 49–55).

Further, *loba* and *kroda* cause hurt to others. Explicating the effects of these two emotions, Dr Ambedkar's Buddha points out: 'Craving comes into being because of desire for gain, when desire for gain becomes a passion for possession, when the spirit of possession gives rise to tenacity of possession it becomes avarice. Avarice and possession, due to uncontrolled acquisitive instinct, calls for watch and ward.' The Buddha goes on to note that craving or greed is to be condemned because it causes strife, hurt, violence, and quarrels, and Dr Ambedkar further glosses the *Mahanidanasutta* on which he draws for his arguments in this context thus: 'That this is the correct analysis of class struggle there can be no doubt' (ibid.: 239). Desire thus produces social strife and contradictions and walking the path of *dhamma*, learning the impermanence of desire and want, of passion and its effects, and practising speech and acts that are mindful of how this may affect others produce social good.

Dr Ambedkar's marking of desire in this manner is particularly interesting, especially for the manner he links it to the doctrine of karma, or the effects of one's deeds. He rejects the notion that karmic effects are felt across time and pursue a soul even after death. Instead, he defines karma not merely as that which rebounds on a person, and about which he can do nothing, except endure its effects. Rather, he argues, karma must be seen to be a principle of order that sustains the universe. In this reading, actions, good or bad, produce their own consequences and this affects not only the doer, but also others. In other words, each of us affects the other and all action, then, is inevitably social. It stands to reason that all of us are implicated in a vast and complicated web of thoughts and deeds (ibid.: 244). To act then would require that one act responsibly—in Dr Ambedkar's view, this would mean that one acted with knowledge, and with a keen awareness of how our acts affect others, be it speech, action, or thoughts. Eschewing *loba*, *kroda* and acquiring the knowledge requisite to do so then were inevitably social acts. This knowledge though was not merely of the mind, but had to instil fellowship on the one hand, and virtue on the other.

The obtaining of such knowledge that would counter desire—defined as *vidya*—required a free exercise of the mind, and for this one ought to free oneself from the tyranny of texts, custom, and faith in supernatural beings, God, and non-purposive discourses on the soul, re-birth, and so on. But the mere acquisition and possession of such knowledge was not enough; one had to learn to exercise one's mind, practice *vidya* with discernment. Discerning wisdom or *pragnya* was very important in this scheme of things, because it alone enabled ethical judgment. Dr Ambedkar made it clear, through his Buddha, that to act right, to follow the *dhamma* may not be easily assumed, in a spirit of mindless innocence. Rather the *dhamma* had to be learnt, through recognition of both right and wrong, and choosing right over wrong thereafter. The *dhamma* was thus learnt ethics, self-consciously chosen, rather than blindly accepted.

Yet *pragnya* was not all, for the *dhamma* had to be suffused with compassion, hence the importance of *karuna*—ethics cannot be a matter of principle but also of active love. The exercise of *karuna*, though fundamental to a practice of the *dhamma*, was still not sufficient. One needed to observe *maitri*, or loving kindness towards all, not only friends but also foes, and ultimately of creation. *Maitri* in this sense was not mere love, but active fellowship with the world, a fellowship that did not elaborate, codify, and render every difference an aspect of hierarchy and inequality (ibid.: 127–32, 325). Further, it was in and through such an annulment of differences between oneself and the larger world, an annulment that is demonstrated in and through meaningful ethical action, that one came to *saddhamma*.

Sadhamma required that one practises righteousness towards others, invites others to observe *dhamma*, sharing with them the knowledge of it, and learns to distinguish *pradanya* or moral insight from mere knowledge of the *dhamma* (ibid.: 291). *Pradanya* however had to co-exist with *sila*, with virtue (ibid: 295). Above all, though, *Sadhamma* meant that one realize the importance of *maitri* above all else, and realize that neither birth nor any other form of privilege may earn one a right, a choice that was unavailable to others. *Saddhamma* was, thus, in Dr Ambedkar's lexicon, the form of that ethical consensus that we forge with each other, maintaining amongst ourselves that we hold and shall exercise rights and compassion in common (ibid.: 325).

Dr Ambedkar made it clear that he did not mean by this that individual differences be subsumed in a collective *dhamma*. He accepted

that our emotional and intellectual needs are different, that there may even be social and cultural differences amongst us, yet, he noted, none can nor may claim superiority over the rest; thus, there is nothing that sets one apart from others, except the nature of one's actions, which, in turn are dependent on one's thoughts, their goodness, purity. In his understanding private and public virtue were closely interlinked, given the nature of thought, which pertains always already to the world, and not only to the thinker that thinks it.

Through a series of arguments, Dr Ambedkar's Buddha, even as the classical Buddha did, rejects creeds intent on verbal or philosophical sophistry. The Buddha also rejects the claims of Brahmins to special privileges. Drawing on well-known texts such as the *Vajrasuchi* which set out to disprove the possibility of differences arising out of conditions of birth, he observes that the nature of birth is not dissimilar, whatever the status and caste of the mother and hence there can be no claiming of privilege on this count (ibid.: 302). He also notes that the Brahminical creed of *chaturvarna* cannot be a general law, since by the Brahmins' own admission it does not exist outside the confines of the land over which their doctrine holds sway (ibid.: 303). This refusal to grant universal value to *chaturvarna* marks an important moment in the text, for it allows Dr Ambedkar to propose that only *saddhamma* could be universal, since it does not recognize the principle of difference, marking status or privilege, as germane to the practice of ethics. It also allows him to demonstrate how, in the ultimate analysis, universal ethics is nothing but another name for fraternity, for a fellowship of people (ibid.: 325).

Throughout *The Buddha and His Dhamma* Dr Ambedkar makes it a point to insist on the virtue of fraternity, which is almost always linked to equality. Arguing that the *varna* order did most harm to women and Sudras, denying them the right to knowledge and the right to bear arms, both of which are required for meaningful social protest, he noted that the Buddha's *dhamma* insisted on these rights—by rendering all human beings capable of attaining wisdom and *nibanna*, and by denying value to violence and war (ibid.: 91). Rebellion in this context required one to dissent and argue one's way to a universal ethics, even as the Buddha did, with his interlocutors.

As much as the Buddha's words, his actions and demeanour are important in Dr Ambedkar's text. They become focal points for a number of issues that Dr Ambedkar wishes to represent or discuss.

Siddhartha is at all times the rational prince, sometimes tired, at other times eager, but his actions are always deliberate. Even when he chooses to leave home, this is on account of the dissident stance he adopts in a water dispute involving the Sakyas and their neighbours, the Koliyas—he exiles himself, rather to validate his point of view. Since his decision to leave comes in the wake of a long period of meditative calm, Yashodhara lets him go, noting that even if she were to hold him back that would mean nothing, keen as he was to leave, and also because she was aware of what bothered him, and so would not request him to stay. Later in the text she sorrows, but Dr Ambedkar has her say that her pain is on account of the mortal being that she is, and knows therefore longing and loss, but not because she did not want Siddhartha to go (ibid.: 41). Not only is the prince rational, but the princess too is gracious and intelligent. Then again, when the Buddha argues with Ananda about letting women be part of the *sangha*, we see a rational, thoughtful man, who is unsure of what this would mean; he insists too that he does not doubt women's capacity for *nibanna* but that he is not clear about how this was to be accommodated (ibid.: 195).

Likewise with others in the grand Buddhist narrative, especially those who appear to be both marginal and iconic, we see Dr Ambedkar endowing each of them with a characteristic importance. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* thus enumerates each and every conversion by a marginal social person, the barber, the *chandali*, the blacksmith in loving detail (ibid.: 185–90). This conscious narrativizing of important aspects of the Buddha and his life and work historicizes the text in particular ways, making a distant past do service to the present.

The text's approach to knowledge is crucial. As I have noted above, Dr Ambedkar is at pains to distinguish false from true knowledge, wasteful exercises in interpretation and argument from knowledge that enables true discernment. His rejection of the claims of scriptural authority, equivocal metaphysics, and a philosophy of hedonism devoid of discernment, while very much within the Buddhist scheme of things, also answer to contemporary notions of worthwhile learning. Karl Marx, or more generally socialism, also constitutes one of the horizons of his enquiry as he examines the problem of understanding and social change.

Throughout *The Buddha and His Dhamma* we find no references to kings and states, except when the text warrants it, as with the exchanges the Buddha has with King Bimbisara and King Pasendi; and even here, the emphasis is on the ruler's righteousness. The state is not the object of Dr Ambedkar's address, and as he seeks to reconstruct this world, he also advances an alternative politics, one in which ethics is indistinguishable from justice, and where equality and fraternity emerge as central to both social life and the polity.

In Conclusion

We have here then a blurring of lines between civil and political society, only this blurring achieves a new social map, and one in which a universal ethics, premised on loving kindness, demands a state and politics that is pervaded by the *dhamma*. Thus it is not so much a question of what the state's attitude towards religions ought to be or whether it ought or ought not to interfere in matters of tradition and custom; rather *The Buddha and His Dhamma* appears to suggest that, as far as the state is concerned, it needs to move towards *saddhamma*, in keeping with the changes the Buddha wants in the realm of the civil order.

The contrast with Pandit Iyothee Thass' Buddhism could not be more evident—if we are to use the terms either of them deployed in their writings. Thass set greater store by practices of the self, by what Dr Ambedkar considered *sila*, whereas Dr Ambedkar insisted on a greater role for *pragnya* and *pradnya* on the one hand, and *maitri* on the other. For Thass, *jeevakarunya*, akin to *maitri*, was the supreme virtue, but this remained in his universe an ethical category, whereas the fellowship that Dr Ambedkar invoked through his use of *maitri* shaded off into that much desired civil and political virtue, fraternity. It was this fraternity that made for the larger social and political good, Dr Ambedkar's Buddha makes clear, as he counsels the Vajjis against whom the monarch Ajatasatru wishes to wage war, that as long as the Vajjis practise a decent collective and fraternal life in their daily affairs, they would succeed in staving off war and conflict. In Thass, *jeevakarunya* remains very much within the realm of *ahimsa*, a creed of abstention, linked to productive rather than fraternal labour.

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Dravidian Movement and Saivites: 1927–1944*

A.R. VENKATACHALAPATHY

‘What, Sir! Your words first appear to support our view, then they seem to skirt it.’—A Saivite in a fictional conversation with a Self-Respecter. *Sivanesan* 2 (6), September 1928

‘I participate in both Saiva Siddhanta meetings and Self-Respect meetings. Some might say that I’ve no ideology and that I am a chameleon. It is not so. I have my ideological disagreements with Periyar . . . Periyar was born to oppose the selfish gang which has enslaved the Tamil language and the Tamil people. If Periyar had not come on the scene, we’d have been in the most degraded state, calling ourselves “shudras” without any shame.’—A. Varadananjayya Pillai, *Periyar Ramaswamy*, Pondicherry, 1949

In the existing literature on the Dravidian movement, the relationship of the Saiva Vellalar elite with the movement constitutes a central problematique. Both contemporaneously and in later scholarly and political literature, the movement has often been identified with the machinations of a bunch of Saiva Vellalar intellectuals who attempted to redefine their identity *vis-à-vis* the Brahmins, and

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also tried to secure a larger share of the fishes and loaves of office. Eugene Irschick, in his work on the non-Brahmin movement and Tamil separatism, sought the intellectual roots of the movement in the writings of the educated non-Brahmins/Vellalars who formulated the concept of a pre-Aryan Dravidian civilization (Irschick 1969: 282–95). R Srinivasan, tracing the ideological genesis of the Dravidian movement, came to a similar conclusion.

Posing the question, 'A Vellala movement?' he saw the Dravidian ideology as 'basically the work of a tiny group of highly educated and capable Vellalars' (Srinivasan 1987: 17). Arguing that the movement ruled out the lowest orders of Tamil society, he holds that the 25 per cent of the middle- and upper-class Vellalars not only created the ideology but were also fervid champions of it (Srinivasan 1987: 4). Such an argument has its political uses and has often been employed to discredit the Dravidian movement. A striking illustration of this could be the recent debate on the Dravidian movement, in the literary supplement of the Tamil daily *Dinamani*. Thamizhavan, albeit using post-modernist phraseology, reiterates the same point, seeing the Dravidian movement as nothing but the collapse of 'a historical alliance' between Brahmins and Vellalars to dominate Tamil society (Thamizhavan 1992). While this argument shares the premises and conclusions of the earlier historiography, there is an interesting shift. Earlier, the Dravidian movement was often judged *vis-à-vis* the Brahmins and the nationalist movement. Roundly condemned for its 'regionalism', 'separatism', and 'chauvinism' and its so-called collaboration with the colonial rulers, the Dravidian movement was seen as undermining the nationalist cause. But in the present context where 'nation' is coming in for increasing attack, and caste, especially the Dalit question, gaining increasing prominence, the Dravidian movement is being judged in relation to this. Attempts are being made to identify it with upper castes, who are portrayed as the real perpetrators of caste oppression. The political mileage drawn from such approaches is considerable (Suresh 1992; Washbrook 1989).

In this context, the present paper attempts a fresh look at the relationship between the Dravidian movement and the Saivite elite in its complexity and ambivalence.¹ The time-frame of the paper is roughly that of the *Suyamariyathai* or the Self-Respect phase of the Dravidian movement, between 1927 and 1944, when it was at its radical best.

1. The Rationalist Critique of Saivism

In November 1925, Periyar E.V. Ramasami (henceforth Periyar) walked out of the Tamil Nadu Congress provincial conference at Kanchipuram, unable to see through his resolution on proportionate communal representation (caste-based reservations). This event was to constitute a watershed in the modern history of Tamil Nadu. Following this, Periyar launched a strident and uninhibited campaign for social justice through communal representation, and a vehement attack on Brahminism which stalled its attainment. *Kudi Arasu*, the weekly started by him some months before his walkout, was the primary vehicle of his ideas. By mid-1927 there was a gradual shift in the content of Periyar's campaign which was reflected in the pages of *Kudi Arasu*. The attack on Brahminism and the championing of reservations quickly grew into a radical critique of caste and religion. The *itihāsams* and *purānams* were critiqued from a rationalist viewpoint and condemned as irrational and inimical to morals and social justice. The *Ramayana* turned out to be one of the first targets of this campaign. E.M. Subramania Pillai, a Saivite scholar, writing under the pseudonym of Chandrasekara Pavalar, began a serial on the 'obscenities of the Ramayana' in *Kudi Arasu*. Gradually, this attack on religion began encompassing Saivism also. Saivite texts like *Periya Puranam* and *Thiruvilaiyadal Puranam*, and the Saivite saints like Thirugnanasambandar, were brought under rationalist scrutiny. In a serial on the venerated *Periya Puranam*, 'Meikandar' declared, 'Periya Puranam creates caste conflicts; Periya Puranam advocates caste differences; Periya Puranam portrays acts inimical to one's self-respect as devotion to God; Periya Puranam justifies murderous deeds as service to Saivism' (*Kudi Arasu*, 26 August 1928).

This attack on Saivism and its apostles by the Self-Respect Movement was initially encountered with shock, disbelief, and dismay by the Saivites. This was because the Self-Respect Movement was generally perceived by the Saivites as a movement started 'to counter the harm done by the Brahmins to the Tamil people' (*Sivanesan*, September 1932). The Saivites had for long seen the non-Brahmin movement as an organization to champion their cause and protect their interests, if not actually launched and run by themselves. In the initial stages of the conflict, this was emphasized again and again, and

a compromise was sought on this ground. As Ilavalaganar, a student of Maraimalai Adigal,² wrote:

Saivism is not one iota different from the primary aim of the Self-Respect Movement. The Self-Respect Movement arose to dispel the illusion of Brahminism from the Tamil people and infuse self-respect into them. Saivism also does the same. The Self-Respect Movement detests the Aryan Brahmins. Saivism too doesn't like the Aryan Brahmins one bit . . . The Self-Respect Movement wishes to uplift the depressed classes. That is also the basic idea of Saivism . . . The Self-Respect Movement is opposed to caste differences among the Tamil people. Saivism too emphasizes the same point . . . When there are so many common points, why should Saivism and Saivite apostles be depreciated and condemned? (*Sentamil Selvi*, July–August 1928)

It was also argued that the non-Brahmin movement drew its intellectual resources from the Saivite intellectuals. Maraimalai Adigal even claimed that the Self-Respect Movement came into being by adopting his views and principles (*Sentamil Selvi*, May–June 1931)! The editor of *Siddhantam*, M. Balasubramania Mudaliar, went one step further when he said, 'The best parts of the Self-Respect Movement are nothing but alms thrown by Maraimalai Adigal, the spiritual father. If they who got these alms and campaigned based on it, are thankless to the spiritual father, all their efforts will go waste . . .' (*Siddhantam*, June 1929). The most strident anti-Self-Respect views were expressed in *Sivanesan*, a Saivite journal published from Chettinadu, which published a series of articles from early 1928 condemning both reforms and radical change expounded by the Self-Respect Movement.

Though there was much in common in the Saivites' reactions, they did not speak in one voice. There was much divergent opinion. In the beginning, these voices were a big chorus and individual strands could not be distinguished easily. But with the relentless campaign of the Self-Respect Movement and the opposition it evoked, the different ideological streams became distinct, highlighting the ambivalent relationship between the two. Let us now turn to these conflicts among the Saivites.

2. Maraimalai Adigal and the Self-Respect Movement

It is hardly surprising that Maraimalai Adigal should be the first to respond to the challenge posed by the Self-Respect Movement. Born

as S. Vedachalam in Nagapattinam, he had his early education in Tamil and Saiva Siddhantam, and was known for his erudition. Somasundara Nayagar, well known for his tirades against Vaishnavism and Vedanta, trained him further in Saiva Siddhantam. Adigal launched the Annual Saiva Siddhanta Conferences in 1906 and occupied an eminent place in the Saivite intellectual world. Well known for his Pure Tamil movement—a movement to rid the Tamil language of loan words, especially from Sanskrit—and his literary and philosophical treatises, he was highly respected.

From Adigal's diaries of this period, it is clear that the Self-Respect Movement occupied his mind. He seems to have discussed the criticism launched against Saivism with anybody who visited him in his house at Pallavaram, then a village outside Madras.³ He thought of ways and means to counter the 'destructive movement' and the 'atheistic vomitings [*sic*]' of Periyar, he asked Ulaganatha Mudaliar, the brother of Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, another eminent Saivite scholar, to arrange for a presidency-wide lecture tour to counter the propaganda of the Self-Respect Movement. Here it is interesting to note why, in Adigal's view, the Self-Respect Movement singled out Saivism for attack. He considered the movement to be the 'mischief of Vaishnavites'! 'The leader of the Self-Respect Movement is a Vaishnavite; his brother too, we come to understand, is a Vaishnavite who has converted many gullible Saivites to Vaishnavism. Their accomplices too are Vaishnavites. Some of the Justice party leaders too are Vaishnavites, they are also Telugu-speakers' (*Sivanesan*, June–July 1928). Thus, Maraimalai Adigal could not, at least initially, comprehend the far-reaching objectives and the significance of the Self-Respect Movement, and was only able to come to terms with it from a very sectarian perspective. But not all Saivites were like him. Probably, this was why Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar refused to publish Adigal's essay 'Saivamum Suyamariyathai Iyakkamum' (Saivism and the Self-Respect Movement), which expressed these views, in his *Navasakti* (*MAD*, 5 July 1928). Adigal had to resort to the orthodox *Sivanesan* to get through his views (*MAD*, 10 August 1928).

Matters came to a head on 22 July 1928. Maraimalai Adigal presided over the annual celebrations of the Balasubramania Bakta Janasabhai at Royapettai, Madras, a leading Saivite association which boasted of Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, his brother, and M. Balasubramania Mudaliar, the editor of *Siddhantam*, as active members among

others. In this meeting, Adigal 'condemned vehemently the atheistic doctrines of Mr Ramasamy Naicker [Periyar] and the mischief of his Suyamariyathai [Self-Respect] Movement' (*MAD*, 22 July 1928). During the course of his lecture, N. Dandapani Pillai, a Self-Respect activist and J.S. Kannappan,⁴ of the editorial board of *Dravidan*, the Justicite Tamil daily, raised questions about the persecution of Jains by the seventh-century Saivite saint Thirugnanasambandar. Consequently, pandemonium broke out, and the meeting ended in confusion.

There were conflicting reports on what actually transpired in the meeting hall. Maraimalai Adigal wrote in his diary that he answered Dandapani Pillai's 'questions tellingly and showed that there was no(t) a particle of evidence to prove the Jains were persecuted by St. Jnanasambanda. My answers satisfied Dandapani Pillai and the audience and Mr Pillai, at the end of the speech, thanked me heartily and left the place' (*MAD*, 23 July 1928). This version was reiterated, in the pamphlet issued by his supporters and disciples, '*Dravidanin Poimai Nandantha Vannam Uraithal*' (A true account of *Dravidan*'s falsehood). But the Self-Respect papers gave a rather different version of the events. *Kudi Arasu* alleged that Maraimalai Adigal instigated the audience to murder Periyar and that, when Dandapani Pillai and Kannappan raised questions, Adigal broke into tears, unable to refute them (*Kudi Arasu*, 20 July 1928).

A virtual print war broke out and serious charges were traded between the two sides. The Balasubramania Bakta Janasabhai issued a series of pamphlets in defence of Adigal and refuted 'the calumnies heaped by the Self-Respecters on the Saivite religion and its apostles.' In *Kudi Arasu* too, there were editorials and articles attacking Maraimalai Adigal. Kaivalyam Swamiyar wrote a particularly hard-hitting piece, alleging that Adigal, while propagating Saivism, actually ate meat on the sly. He further added, 'Swami Vedachalam [Maraimalai Adigal] is no apostle born to establish religion. Nor is he a prophet. He is but a tutor who teaches for a mere wage' (*Kudi Arasu*, 12 August 1928).

Maraimalai Adigal was so infuriated that he met K. Subramania Pillai, eminent Saivite scholar, at his residence in Egmore in Madras, and 'warned him of the Justice party: told him plainly that he must not put faith in the support of that and asked him to practise as a vakil . . .' (*MAD*, 24 July 1928). He was so incensed about 'the brute

followers of Suyamariyathai movement [who] continuously criticize me with rancour and indiscrimination', that he actually contemplated sending a letter to the police authorities about their 'mischief'.

Finally, in order to defuse the situation Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar and K.A.P. Viswanatham, a Saivite and an active member of the Justice party, met Maraimalai Adigal at Pallavaram and attempted a reconciliation. They requested him to write 'a letter in a friendly tone' addressed to Periyar, to which Adigal readily complied. The letter ran as follows:

Dear Sir,—I am fine. Let me know of your well-being. I understand from [K.A.P.] Viswanatha Pillai of Tiruchi that there is a note about me in *Kudi Arasu*. I am given to understand that it was written based on the report of *Dravidan* and *Tamilnadu* on the annual celebrations at Chennai Guhananda Nilayam. I've never wished nor even uttered a word that either you or the friends of your movement may come to harm. Don't mistake me and bear any grudge. However, I am not in agreement with your views regarding God and the apostles. Please do not get offended by some of the reports in the press. May your attempts for the uplift of the Tamil people succeed (*Kudi Arasu*, 2 September 1928).

But the matter did not end there. As the letter was 'wrongly distributed' by K.A.P. Viswanatham, the *Dravidan* published it as an apology tendered by Maraimalai Adigal to Periyar. Following this, Periyar wrote a long editorial in his *Kudi Arasu*. The editorial is of interest, not only for the magnanimity shown by Periyar, but also for the light it throws on the basis of the original reconciliation. Periyar emphasized that he had demanded an apology only for putting an end to the whole controversy. He not only accepted full responsibility for *Dravidan's* unwarranted discourse of the letter but also apologized unconditionally to Adigal. Only then did he publish Adigal's letter. However, he stood steadfast in his principles and said, 'But regarding the difference of opinion, how much ever [Maraimalai Adigal] is willing to compromise, we will not budge an inch from our views and principles, either for the sake of his or anybody else's friendship.' Then why did Periyar accept a reconciliation? 'Right from the time we came to know of [Maraimalai Adigal], a sort of inexplicable attachment grew. Whenever we discussed about him with our friends, it emerged that he was a close confidante and a source of strength to all our

aspirations and principles' (*Kudi Arasu*, 2 September 1928). Thus, it was only on a broad non-Brahmin platform that a reconciliation was struck. Little else was yielded, as both stuck to their guns. As a sign of the reconciliation Maraimalai Adigal began a serial on the *Ramayanam* in the Self-Respect English weekly, the *Revolt*.

3. The Tirunelveli Saivite Conference

The reconciliation between Periyar and Maraimalai Adigal was more at the personal level and hardly addressed the ideological issues that were at the bottom of the controversy. As reiterated by Periyar, even in the 'unconditional apology' to Adigal, the Self-Respect Movement continued its tirade against Saivism. And when the Saivites sought to counter, in their view, the blasphemous campaign, the *Kudi Arasu* hit below the belt by exposing them in the following terms:

When the Self-Respect Movement condemned Brahmins and Brahminism, Vaishnavism and Vaishnavites, these Saivites jumped in joy and sang paeans to the Self-Respect Movement.

Moreover, they even helped us when we attacked Sankarachariar and Brahmin domination. Later, when we started exposing the Vaishnavite puranams, they helped us. Further, when we argued that there was no such thing as the Hindu religion and that what goes by the name of Hinduism is nothing but Brahminism, they even rallied evidence to prove it (*Kudi Arasu*, 7 October 1928).

As noted earlier, the Saivite scholar, E.M. Subramania Pillai had written a series of articles on the 'obscenities of the Ramayanam' in *Kudi Arasu*.

The continued attack on Saivism by the Self-Respecters impelled the Saivites to adopt immediate firefighting tactics. In an 'appeal to the Saivite people, Saivite mutts and Saivite associations', the South India Saiva Siddhanta Sangam of Tirunelveli (run by V. Thiruvarangam Pillai and his brother, V. Subbiah Pillai, the founders of the Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society) called for urgent action. It called for extended lecture tours of Saivite propagandists, the publication of pamphlets, the establishment of Saivite schools and more importantly the organizing of a Saivite conference. Out of this was born the Saivapperiyar Thanikkootam (The Special Conference of Saivite

Scholars) which played a crucial role in the struggle between the Saivites and the Self-Respect Movement, throwing into sharp relief the complexities of the subject of our present exercise.

S. Satchidanandam Pillai, a respected Saivite scholar, was the first to respond to this appeal. In a lengthy personal communication to V. Thiruvarangam Pillai, he discussed matters at length. He conceded that '*Kudi Arasu* and *Dravidan* were first launched with the lofty ideal of improving the lot of the Tamil people in the political, public and social life. With the confused idea of freeing the Tamils from the conspiracy of Brahmins as their objective', they had now rejected religion as a whole. Blaming the Self-Respect leaders of ignorance in religious matters, he added that there was indeed some decadence in the state of religion. 'In this context', he wrote, 'It is my view that before condemning the unwarranted trespasses of *Kudi Arasu* and *Dravidan*, we must call a meeting of scholars of Saivite and Vaishnavite Tamil people,⁵ who are well-versed in the arts, religious texts, worldly matters, and ancient religion and culture. The meeting should not be a big conference which falls into the vile net of the press, but held in seclusion. The resolutions arrived at may alone be made public. Only then should we consider condemning the above journals. I am of the view that we should guide them along the right path and not try to finish them off. It is expedient to invite the editor of *Kudi Arasu* to the meeting and arrange for a dialogue.'

Satchidanandam Pillai's views were the result of much serious thought and contemplation. Resolutions were passed in the Saiva Siddhanta Mahasamajam in December 1928 and South India Saiva Siddhanta Sangam in January 1929 calling for the special conference of Saivite scholars. The moderation and sobriety of Satchidanandam Pillai were evident in the planning of the conference. But the Self-Respect conference held on 17–18 February 1929 at Chingleput came as the last straw, and any hopes of dialogue or compromise were dashed. In this historic conference, radical speeches and resolutions were made (*Kudi Arasu*, 24 February 1929). Two of the resolutions that evoked hysterical reactions among the Saivites were the ones regarding the dropping of caste surnames, and the condemnation of sporting religious marks on the forehead.⁶

These resolutions gave a sense of urgency to the Saivites and the arrangements for the special conference were hastened. Satchidanandam

Pillai set the tone of the conference with a questionnaire titled 'Saivapperiyar Thanikkoottathin Avasiyamum Velaiyum' (The need for the special conference of Saivite scholars and its functions). This was carried in all important Saivite journals with an appeal for the considered response of all concerned Saivites. The statement began with the preamble: 'Confusion now looms large in the society and religious life of Tamil Nadu. As the social formation and religion appear to be inextricably tied to one another, social reformers argue that religion is the cause of all social hardships, and are going about condemning religion and working hard against it.' It proceeded to ask the following questions: (1) Is religion essential for culture and morality? (2) If yes, what is the nature of religious life? (3) What sort of religion is required in this century? (4) Can Saivism be that religion? and (5) What are the cardinal principles and practices of Saivism? The list extended to about 25 questions. Clearly, the Self-Respect challenge had rattled the Saivites: they were now being forced to introspect and raise fundamental questions. The Self-Respecters responded to this with counter-questions, reiterating their position.

Consequently, the special conference evoked great interest and the outcome was eagerly awaited. It also brought to the fore the various strands within the Saivites and much debate went on about them. Three predominant divisions could be discerned among the Saivites. The first was the orthodox group, consisting of scholars like P. Muthiah Pillai and Swaminatha Pandithar, who were for fundamentals, and opposed all change. *Sivanesan* was their mouthpiece. The dominant strand was that of the moderates which included Maraimalai Adigal, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, Satchidanandam Pillai, and M. Balasubramania Mudaliar. Their aim was to accept some amount of reforms and overhaul Saivism to the needs of changing times, and silence criticism from others, especially the Self-Respect Movement. They wielded considerable influence over the Saivite fold and controlled major journals like *Navasakti*, *Sentamil Selvi*, and *Siddhantam*. Last came the reformists, a motley crowd consisting of S. Murugappa, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, P. Chidambaram Pillai, P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai, K.M. Balasubramaniam and others.⁷

The special conference was held on 29–31 March 1929 at Tirunelveli. Over 90 scholars representing about 35 Saivite organizations were present. The conference was bogged down in controversy right from

the beginning. There were widespread accusations that the organizers had sent invitations and entry forms only to their trusted men. P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai was at first even denied entry into the conference hall. He further complained that the conference resolutions were all passed only in the subjects committee and not debated in the general council (*Swadesamitran*, 20 May 1929).

The strength of the moderates was only too evident as all the resolutions reflected their preponderance. The conference resolved that religion was indispensable for morality and righteous living, and that Saivism was a rational religion suited to all times and all social formations. But it cannot be denied that the propaganda of the Self-Respecters too had its impact. Some forward-looking resolutions like the abolition of dedication of devadasis to Saivite temples, the elimination of obscene images from temples, and the nominal equality of all devotees within the precincts of the temple, were carried out.⁸

The other sections of the Saivite fold could not push forward their views. The orthodox Saivites were totally sidelined and the conference 'was tactful enough to steer clear of the shoals and shallows of orthodox Saivism' (*Revolt*, 10 April 1929). P. Muthiah Pillai opposed the resolutions regarding the equality of all inside the temple. He argued that 'the base classes' who indulge in drink and such other vices had no business inside the temples. He further elaborated his views in a particularly obscurantist article titled 'Poruthamatra Theermanangal' (Irrelevant Resolutions).

The reformists fared even worse, and as the *Revolt* observed, a three months' fuss had ended only in a lot of smoke. Scholars like K.M. Balasubramaniam, S. Murugappa, and P. Chidambaram Pillai did not even turn up at the conference, for whatever reason. The reformists put up a weak presence in the form of V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai, and it is not even clear what they actually did. *Kudi Arasu* reported that 'V.O. Chidambaram Pillai elaborated on some of the ways to reform Saivism. As most of the delegates did not agree to his views, Mr Pillai walked out of the Subjects Committee' (*Kudi Arasu*, April 1929). *Kudi Arasu*, probably exaggerating, wrote, 'It appears that V.O. Chidambaram Pillai and P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai were not permitted to attend the Special Committee. Then V.O. Chidambaram Pillai walked out saying that, instead of even outsiders getting drawn towards Saivism, the outcome

of the conference was that some actually had to move out of Saivism' (*Kudi Arasu*, 7 April 1929).

Though the Saivite journals maintained silence over this affair in the beginning, later they came out with their version. M. Balasubramania Mudaliar said that V.O. Chidambaram Pillai was present during the entire course of the Subjects Committee's proceedings and that he signed the minutes and posed for the photograph in the end; further he had even argued that sporting sacred ash was not an indispensable Saivite practice. In keeping with his view, the Subjects Committee had defined the practice (*anuttanan*) as a 'general practice' (*Siddhantam*, May 1929).

Thirukootasundaram Pillai criticized the formal passing of resolutions at the general council without any debate. He was a Gandhian nationalist and had no connection with the Self-Respect Movement as such. But, as he had a zeal for reform, he participated in the conference. As the Self-Respect journals wrote in praise of his activities, he was put in a delicate situation and was forced to explain his stance *vis-à-vis* the Self-Respect Movement through a public statement. He explained that he favoured the reforms proposed by the Self-Respect Movement but not at the cost of the political freedom of the nation.

On the whole, the Tirunelveli Special Conference ended with the moderates asserting themselves. Both the conservatives and the reformists were sidelined in the battle at Tirunelveli. But the war was not yet over. A further bout had to be fought at the Thiruppathirippuliyur conference, to which we now turn.

4. The Thiruppathirippuliyur Saivite Conference

The Tirunelveli conference had closed with the decision that the resolutions passed had to be ratified in a further conference to be held at Thiruppathirippuliyur, in the light of further discussions.

Learning from the Tirunelveli experience, rearguard action was taken to barricade the conference from Self-Respecters' infiltration. In a statement, the secretary of the conference, M. Balasubramania Mudaliar, announced that only delegates sent by Saivite associations would have a vote: all amendments were to be submitted in writing beforehand, and finally, all those who wanted to address the conference would have to submit the written text (*Navasakti*, 8 May 1929).

The target of these restrictions and their objectives was clear.

They were meant to ward off any Self-Respect threat to the hold of the moderate Saivites. P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai condemned the moves of the organizers and laid bare their motives. *Kudi Arasu* condemned these moves: 'Isn't it clear from the fact that Messrs V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai and Poovalur Selvaganapathy were not permitted to attend the Saivite Conference at Tirunelveli and Thiruppathirippuliyur, that whatever we had said about the Saivite scholars and their motives in organizing the Conference is true?' (*Kudi Arasu*, 29 June 1929).

The Thiruppathirippuliyur conference was held as scheduled and went on for six long days from 16 May 1929. The conference was held with much fanfare in the Gnaniyar Mutt under the presidentship of Maraimalai Adigal. In this conference, orthodoxy raised its head once again and attempted a comeback. *Sivanesan* expressed its apprehension that the presidentship of Maraimalai Adigal, instead of Gnaniyar Adigal as contemplated earlier, would give scope for further reforms. It called for resolutions that would reflect, in its view, the true aspirations of the entire Saivite community (*Sivanesan*, April–May 1929). Rm. S. Chokkalinga Ayya of Chidambaram argued against the equality of all in the precincts of the temple. P. Muthiah Pillai continued his conservative attack by critiquing at length the presidential address of Maraimalai Adigal.

The conference finally concluded that religious reforms should be effected without prejudice to 'indispensable ancient principles', and granted quite a few concessions to the orthodox. The sporting of sacred ash which was changed to 'general practice' from 'indispensable practice' in the Tirunelveli conference was again reversed. Moreover, the clause that only those who agreed to the resolutions would get franchise was incorporated into the constitution of the Saiva Siddhanta Mahasamajam, the apex body of all Saivite associations (*Siddhantam*, June 1929).

The Saivites thus met the challenge posed by the Self-Respect Movement. The moderates asserted themselves by granting token concessions to the conservatives and fully warded off the reformist challenge. As the entire reformist stream was given no quarter in the conference, a rival conference was called by it. The Self-Respect Saivites' conference was held on 26 May 1929, where S. Murugappa and N. Dandapani Pillai spoke. They argued that Saivism had become a puranic religion and formal features were given priority over the substantive

essence. The Tirunelveli and Thiruppathirippuliyur conferences were roundly condemned, and their resolutions, they maintained, 'would not in any way bind the true Saivites'. It was also resolved to hold the next conference at Tiruchi, and Mani. Thirunavukkarasu Mudaliar, V.O. Chidambaram Pillai, P. Thirukootasundaram Pillai, K.A.P. Viswanatham, S. Gurusami, Sami Chidambaram, and S. Murugappa were elected to the reception committee. We have no further news on this conference, which in all likelihood, fizzled out. But another True Saivites conference was held on 21 July 1929 at Tirunelveli, where P. Chidambaram Pillai of Nagercoil delivered a lecture on 'Self-Respect and Saivism',⁹ attacking the degeneration which had set into Saivism due to the corrupting influence of Smartha Brahminism. In a desperate bid to win over the Saivites, he spoke of the Saiva-Vellalar origins of the Self-Respect Movement. He also tried to rally sober scholars like Satchidanandam Pillai by attempting to make common cause. But his strong condemnation of caste superiority and the Aryan element in Saivism, along with the advocacy of liberty, equality, and fraternity, was only bound to further alienate the Saivites. K.M. Balasubramaniam wrote on more or less similar lines, presenting the Self-Respect Saivite view in his articles in the *Revolt*.

The reformist Self-Respect Saivites were clearly marginal to the Saivite fold. Apart from their numerical minority, they also lacked ideological clarity, which further weakened them. This is also borne out by their future career, which requires a separate study. The majority of the Saivite elite had met the challenge posed by the Self-Respect Movement on its own terms and also redefined their identity. The relationship with the non-Brahmin movement was more or less clearly delineated. Subsequently it was mainly a question of strategic alliance at times of mutual crises and common threats. Such alliances were struck in the 1930s, only to break down after the storm had blown over.

5. Saivite and Self-Respect Collaboration

The 1930s did not witness the sort of high-strung and heated conflicts between the Saivites and the Self-Respect Movement that marked the final years of the previous decade. The non-Brahmin movement, which was expanding its social base and mobilizing a far wider section of the

populace than ever before, had made clear what its position was *vis-à-vis* the Saivites. The link between these two aspects deserves a more thorough study, which we shall not undertake here. Ideologically too, the Self-Respect Movement had clearly defined its stance regarding Saivism: the Saivite texts, apostles and elites were to be treated on a par with other religions, whether Aryan or non-Aryan. Religion, of whatever origin, was to be targeted from a rationalist perspective.

Gradually the critique of Saivism lost much of its sting, though it continued to be made in the pages and platforms of the Self-Respect journals and conferences. The Saivite reaction too was not as vociferous, and resolutions condemning Self-Respect propaganda were proposed more as a routine, and passed without much hype. For instance, in the Saivite conference at Thiruvennainallur in the early 1930s, a resolution was passed calling for the defence of Saivism against the 'present danger' by appointing propagandists, publishing and distributing pamphlets and booklets, and the like. Similarly, in the annual conference of the Saiva Siddhanta Mahasamajam held at Thiruvirkolam in January 1933, the questions of untouchability, caste distinctions and temple-entry were discussed, in which the impact of the encounter with the Self-Respect Movement could be felt (*Siddhantam*, January 1933).

Direct encounters between the two, which were now becoming stray, continued to be marked by heated exchanges. The Madras Provincial Tamil Conference held in June 1934 was one such instance. In the Subjects Committee of this conference presided over by T.V. Umamaheswaran Pillai, C.D. Nayagam, closely identified with the Self-Respect Movement, raised the question of the agenda right at the outset. Chavadi Kootha Nayanar wanted to bring a resolution calling for the abolition of caste, which was disallowed. Virudhai Sivagnana Yogigal posed a challenge to the Self-Respecters by saying that all Tamil works affirmed the existence of god. Someone from the crowd said that there should be scope to discuss atheism too. T.V. Umamaheswaran Pillai had to intervene and put an end to all such discussion. Later, as Maraimalai Adigal began his inaugural lecture, C.D. Nayagam raised a point of order saying, 'a conference meant to discuss Tamil should not be begun with an invocation to god.' When Adigal queried if *Thevaram* could be sung, Nayagam replied that it could be sung as music (*Kumaran*, June 1934).

Another turning point in the relationship between the two sides occurred in 1935. In that year, Maraimalai Adigal's book of essays, *Arivurai Kothu*, was prescribed as a textbook for intermediate examinations of the University of Madras. Nationalist journals like *Hindu*, *Dinamani*, *Swadesamitran* and *Ooliyan* raised a cry that one particular essay titled, 'Tamils and Westerners', was an affront to nationalist sentiment as it spoke highly of the West at the expense of Tamils. *Ooliyan* declared, 'No true son of Mother Tamil will bear to read the passages which indulge in unjustifiable praise of westerners and deride Tamils in the most repulsive terms . . . That such acts should be done in the name of non-Brahmin struggle is a shame to those who call themselves non-Brahmins' (*Ooliyan*, 9 August 1935). The nationalist press demanded the withdrawal of the book from the university syllabus.

The Self-Respect Movement, burying the hatchet and sinking its earlier differences, hastened to the defence of Maraimalai Adigal. *Kudi Arasu*, *Pakutharivu* and *Justice* published editorials and articles justifying Adigal's position and his constructive critique of the Tamils. Neelavathi, writing in *Kudi Arasu*, rallied evidence from Subramania Bharati, the great nationalist Tamil poet, who had made similar observations. Kaivalyam writing in the same journal exposed the motivations behind the moves of the nationalist press and alleged that it was nothing but a Brahmin conspiracy. *Pakutharivu* compared Maraimalai Adigal favourably to U.V. Swaminatha Iyer, and drew attention to the disproportionate share of respect, fame and name that the latter had made. The burden of the Self-Respect response was that Adigal was being made the target of attack for being an erudite non-Brahmin scholar, which fact the Brahmins could not stomach. Earlier differences and bad blood were forgotten. In fact, when Maraimalai Adigal remitted some money to Periyar for the books that had been sent Periyar returned the money saying that the books were a gift.

These acts of personal goodwill were followed by a broader alliance between the Self-Respect Movement and the Saivites during the anti-Hindi agitation in 1937-9 (Arooran 1980). In 1937, shortly after accepting office under the Government of India Act, 1935 C. Rajagopalachari (Rajaji) introduced compulsory Hindi in schools. This was seen as a brazen act of imposition of a foreign language, to the detriment of Tamil language and culture. The Self-Respect Movement

picked up the gauntlet and launched an agitation calling for the repeal of Hindi. The Saivite elite too, who for long had championed the Tamil cause and even proclaimed themselves as the guardians of Tamil, jumped into the fray. Both sides opposed Hindi and saw its imposition as part of a larger Brahmin conspiracy.

The Saivites conducted a number of meetings and processions to condemn Rajaji's move. Inaugurating the Tiruchi Tamil Conference, K. Subramania Pillai asserted that the entry of Hindi would spell doom to Tamil and even called for the creation of a separate Tamil province. In the Annual Saiva Siddhanta Mahasamajam Conference at Vellore held in December 1937, similar views were expressed and resolutions passed. One resolution condemned the imposition of Hindi, which was not even part of the Congress manifesto. T.V. Umamaheswaran Pillai organized condemnatory meetings under the aegis of the Karanthai Tamil Sangam in Thanjavur. The Tillai Tamil Sangam at Chidambaram, in its first anniversary meeting, condemned compulsory Hindi. Prominent Saivite Tamil scholars like N. Kandaswamy Pillai, Pandithamani M. Kathiresan Chettiar and S. Somasundara Bharati participated in this conference. At Thiruvaiyaru, R. Venkatachalam Pillai led a rally of students of the Sentamil College on 31 August 1937. He also organized a meeting in November 1937, in which S. Somasundara Bharati, T.V. Umamaheswaran Pillai and K.A.P. Viswanatham spoke. The Saivite elite in their traditional stronghold of Tirunelveli organized an association called Tamil Pathukappu Kazhagam (Tamil Protection Association) to fight Hindi. Doyens of the Saivite world M.V. Nellaiyappa Pillai, M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, Punnaivananatha Mudaliar, K. Appadurai and V. Thiruvarangam Pillai were active in this association. The association also published a number of pamphlets. V. Thiruvarangam Pillai, who was the moving spirit behind it, published a number of anti-Hindi writings in *Sentamil Selvi*, the Tamil research journal run by him. Scholars like Maraimalai Adigal, Sivananda Adigal, M.V. Nellaiyappa Pillai, Arul Thangaiah, Devaneya Pavanar and Ilavalaganar contributed extensively to the above journal.

It was in the context of the anti-Hindi campaign that the Self-Respect Movement sought to forge an open alliance with the Saivites. Its call to the Saivite world was marked by statements meant to provoke them into an active alliance, which also sheds light on the

actual nature of the relationship then existing between the two. *Kudi Arasu* exhorted the heads of the powerful Saivite mutts: 'We will forget all that you have done before. Bravely come forward now; apart from providing pecuniary help, you should also send your devotees to our side . . .' (*Kudi Arasu*, 8 May 1938). Again, in another editorial, *Kudi Arasu*, calling for the unity of all Tamils, dubbed the imposition of Hindi as an insult to Saivism. It went on to elaborate:

It can be generally said that if the Tamil people have tumbled into the Aryan trap and are unable to extricate themselves, it is because the Saivites are assisting the Aryans . . . It was because of this that Aryans achieved dominance in Tamil society through religion . . . To this day, it is the Saivites who act as Hanumans in maintaining this dominance. We ask them, should they not expiate for their past acts. There is no doubt that the ruthless rule of Achariar [Rajaji] will come to an end the very day that true Saivites attain at least an iota of self-respect and fight against their 'Satsudra' status. And if Achariar is able to indulge in ruthless and foolhardy acts it is because he is certain that Saivites will not attain such consciousness easily. (*Kudi Arasu*, 29 May 1938)

We notice here a shrewd mix of incitement and encouragement to both provoke and exhort Saivites to join hands with the Self-Respect Movement to oppose Hindi. The basis on which the alliance was sought was anti-Brahminism and a threat to the Tamil language.

An article in *Kudi Arasu* reminded the Saivites of the hue and cry they had raised against the Self-Respect Movement in the late 1920s, and asked sarcastically what they were going to do when the Brahmins were attacking Tamil which had been begotten by Lord Siva himself. M.R. Mithiran of Dindigul wrote an epistle in verse form to Maraimalai Adigal requesting him to jump into the fray and join hands with S. Somasundara Bharati in the fight against Hindi.

The call of the Self-Respecters did not go unheeded. On the occasion of the annual celebrations at the Thiruppathirippuliyur mutt in June 1938, Gnaniyar Adigal, when asked about the introduction of Hindi, said: 'A thousand years ago, Sanskrit came to Tamilnadu. We welcomed it . . . A few centuries ago, English came. We said, 'Welcome' and showed warm hospitality. What did we gain? Slowly these two languages devoured our Tamil language. Now Hindi too is coming. Moreover it is going to be mandatory. Let it come and stay. Let

Tamil lovers be abettors to this! ' (*Navasakti*, 17 June 1938: original emphasis).

Such moving words uttered by a venerated scholar-saint could not be easily ignored. Even Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliar, opposed to the anti-Hindi agitation as it undermined the nationalist cause, was forced to publish this speech in his *Navasakti*.

An alliance between Saivites and the Self-Respect Movement was marked by a series of joint meetings and conferences. At the third Self-Respect Conference in Thuraiyar in August 1937, Periyar, Ponnambalanar, K.M. Balasubramaniam, C.N. Annadurai, and K.A.P. Viswanatham spoke. In Madras, S. Somasundara Bharati, C.N. Annadurai, and K.M. Balasubramaniam addressed an anti-Hindi meeting. K.M. Balasubramaniam, K.A.P. Viswanatham, and C.N. Annadurai addressed the third Salem District Self-Respect Conference in October 1937. S. Somasundara Bharati went on an extended lecture tour of Tamil Nadu calling for the repeal of compulsory Hindi. At Tirunelveli, C.N. Annadurai spoke on the platform of the Tamil Pathukappu Kazhagam in October 1937, with M.S. Purnalingam Pillai in the chair, S. Somasundara Bharati as a co-speaker, and M.V. Nellaiyappa Pillai proposing a vote of thanks. The third Madras Provincial Conference at Tiruchi in December 1937 contained a fair proportion of Self-Respect leaders like Periyar, C.N. Annadurai, Gurusami and Kunchitham. So was the Ramanathapuram District Tamil Conference held in December 1938.

The Saivite journals were open to the Self-Respecters and vice versa. The proceedings of the anti-Hindi agitation were reported at length, especially of the Saivite meetings, by Self-Respect journals. Ezhathu Sivananda Adigal, on behalf of the Self-Respect Movement, printed and distributed 15,000 free copies of Maraimalai Adigal's English booklet, 'Why Hindi should not be made the Lingua Franca of India' (*MAD*, 3 November 1937). The agitation against compulsory Hindi manifested views that both the Self-Respect Movement and the Saivites shared. A classic instance would be the inaugural lecture that T.V. Umamaheswaran Pillai delivered at the Tiruchi Tamil Conference in December 1937. Harking back to the great antiquity of Tamils, he ascribed their fall to Aryan conspiracy. The brazen actions of the Congress ministry and the vanity of Rajaji were identified with Brahminism and roundly condemned.

But the consensus that had been forged had its limits. The Self-Respect Movement's objectives were far-reaching, and the alliance with the Saivites was arrived only on an anti-Brahmin platform to defend a commonly perceived threat to Tamil. The limits were clear even during the honeymoon. At the Tiruchi conference Periyar brought a resolution saying that the conference had lost confidence in the Governor of Madras as he had signed the Congress bill on Hindi. Many developed cold feet and Periyar's resolution had to be dropped (*Kudi Arasu*, 23 January 1938). A deputation to meet the Governor was then proposed. Periyar declined to be part of this deputation as he felt that the Governor would not intervene in this matter as the British had nothing to lose in this matter.

This incident dramatically highlights the ambit of the consensus. The Self-Respect Movement had far-reaching goals, and the anti-Hindi agitation was only one issue in its programme, and was not an end in itself as it was for the Saivites. Moreover, given its political experience, it was not averse to using coercive agitational tactics to achieve its programme. The Saivite elite could never think beyond safe, constitutional methods. It was only a sense of crisis and the threat of a common danger that had led to their alliance. With the Congress relinquishing office after the outbreak of the Second World War and the repeal of compulsory Hindi, the stage was once again set for conflict between the two.

The first of such conflicts in the immediate aftermath of the anti-Hindi agitation was the Tamil Marriage Conference. As part of its larger programme for a socially just and egalitarian society, the marriage system also came under the Self-Respect Movement's attack. The prevailing system of marriages was condemned as patriarchal, Aryan, devised to serve the needs of Brahmin priests. To this system, the Self-Respect Movement counterposed a new form of marriage which emphasized the contractual nature of the relationship and the equality of man and woman in it. This new system did away with Brahmin officiation, rituals, and even the *thali*, the wedding chain which the bride was expected to wear around her neck all through her life (Anandhi 1991; Pandian *et al.* 1991).

While the anti-Brahmin nature of Self-Respect marriage was welcome to the Saivites, its other aspects, especially the anti-religious and anti-patriarchal content, were anathema. In July 1939, a Tamil

Marriage Conference was conducted in Madras. Presided over by Maraimalai Adigal, the speakers included K. Subramania Pillai, S. Somasundara Bharati, and T.V. Umamaheswaran Pillai, the very Saivites who were in the vanguard of the anti-Hindi agitation. In the conference it was emphasized that present-day marriages were full of embellishments introduced by Aryan Brahmins after their infiltration into Tamil society.¹⁰ The ancient Tamil practice of marriage, based on love, was to be emulated. Brahmin officiation and Sanskrit incantations were to be abolished. Simple marriages, in the presence of elders, by the tying of the *thali*, was to be the basis of the Tamil system of marriage (*Kumaran*, 27 July 1939).

In 1940, the Saivites organized the Tamilar Samaya Manadu (Conference of Tamil Religion). Here too, Maraimalai Adigal, S.S. Bharati, and K. Subramania Pillai gave shape to the Saivite response. The Self-Respect Movement interpreted the pre-Aryan Tamil society in secular terms. A golden age of a harmonious society, devoid of religion and caste, was portrayed as the ideal that was to be recreated. The Saivite conception went only halfway. Pre-Aryan Tamil society in their view was a Vellalar civilization. Saivism was its religion. Caste distinctions based on birth, rituals, and priesthood were Aryan accretions. Some of the best elements of Aryan-Brahminism were actually the product of Tamil genius which had been appropriated from Saivism (Adigal 1927; Pillai 1940). These views were put forward in the conference and colonial Hindu laws were condemned for their Aryan bias. During the course of the conference some Self-Respect activists stormed in and tried to debate the resolutions, causing chaos. The Self-Respect Movement also responded in writing to the Saivite view expressed in the conference.

The incidents of Self-Respecters gatecrashing into Saivite meetings were more or less regular affairs, and were seen more as a nuisance than as real challenges to the Saivite view. For instance, at the Salem Sentamil Conference, presided over by Maraimalai Adigal in October 1944, R. Nedunchelivan 'spoke insultingly of Saiva religion and temple worship and offended the audience which rose against him. He and his self-respecters caused great commotion' (*MAD*, 2 October 1944). In 1943, when the Self-Respect Movement launched a campaign to burn publicly the Kamba Ramayanam and the Periya Puranam, the Saivite reaction was a muted echo of the late 1920s. Pandithamani Kathiresan

Chettiar released a statement condemning the move in strong terms. And when an open debate between the Self-Respect leaders and Saivite scholars was organized in early 1943, C.N. Annadurai and Ezhathu Adigal confronted S. Somasundara Bharati and R.P. Sethu Pillai. While the brunt of the attack was against the Kamba Ramayanam, the Saivite classic *Periya Puranam* received only token mention. Moreover, S.S. Bharati and R.P. Sethu Pillai defended the classics not in religious/Saivite terms but more or less purely on literary and aesthetic grounds. Anna carried the day with his youthful exuberance and novel style of elocution. Clearly the Saivite question had ceased to be an issue. Yet the fact remains: the stalwarts of the anti-Hindi agitation, who once shared a common platform, now crossed swords.

6. Conclusion

The discussion of the Self-Respect Movement and the Saivite elite suggests that a one-to-one matching of the Saivites and the Dravidian movement is untenable and does not even deserve the description of being reductionist. With the launching of the Self-Respect Movement in the mid-1920s, the gulf between the Saivite elite and the non-Brahmin movement widened enormously. The differences between the two were predominantly ideological, which rattled the Saivites into rethinking their religion, philosophy, and politics. The discussions within the Saivite fold crystallized and came to the fore under the impact of the Self-Respect Movement. While the non-Brahmin movement did have its ideological genesis in the intellectual output of the Saivite elite, the roots of the Self-Respect Movement did not draw solely from this, and even when it did, it gave an entirely radical interpretation which terrified the Saivites.

Even when both shared an anti-Brahminism, there was wide divergence over what it meant. The Saivites preferred a sectarian interpretation to anti-Brahminism, harking back to a pre-Aryan Tamil society where the Vellalars occupied a pre-eminent position. In this conception of ancient Tamil society, Saivites replaced Brahmins, and their scriptures replaced the Vedas. Even caste remained, though it was only occupation-based and no stigma was attached to it.

In comparison to this, the Self-Respect version was revolutionary. In its view ancient Tamil society was egalitarian and democratic.

There was neither religion nor caste. Perfect equality prevailed. The disintegration of this ideal society was seen to be the result of Brahmin incursion into Tamil country and all the ills of a caste-ridden and religious society were attributed to this. In many ways this reminds us of the notion of 'Norman Yoke' which was held by the radicals during the English Revolution: the fall of merry England was seen to be the result of the Norman invasion. This notion possessed immense radical potential during the seventeenth century and impelled the English to insurgency (Hill 1986). Further, when the Tamil classical canon was constructed in a counter-hegemonic move in the 1940s, the Dravidian movement was able to exclude religious texts, which in the Tamil context mostly consisted of Saivite works.

The late 1940s and 1950s saw a further widening of the social base of the Dravidian movement, with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) joining electoral politics. Consequently, it has, in post-independence Tamil Nadu, created an ambience to contest the still-powerful Brahmin hegemony and has also delivered a share of political power to backward castes.¹¹ Thus, the Saivite question in the Dravidian movement would now seem to be of little more than academic interest, if not for the fact that recent researchers have once again raised the bogey of Vellalar dominance.

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Notes

1. The definition of Saivites is no doubt difficult: underlining the complexity of the whole issue in question. As P. Chidambaram Pillai, both a Saivite and a Self-Respecter, said in 1929: 'Who is a Saivite and what is Saivism are difficult to define. Sometimes it denotes a caste or sub-caste; at other times it denotes a religion; at a third it denotes a system of philosophy. It may be all three at the same time. It may indicate a Vellalar or not; it may indicate a vegetarian or non-vegetarian' (*Suyamariyathaiyum Saivamum*, Erode 1935). For purposes of the issue raised in this paper, Saivite refers to the educated elite belonging to the upper castes of Saiva Vellalars, Mudaliars, Chettiars, etc. who swore by the Saivite religion and Saiva Siddhanta philosophy and identified themselves as Saivites.
2. Maraimalai Adigal (1876–1950) was an eminent scholar in Tamil and Saivism. He was a precocious youth and was associated with P. Sundaram Pillai and Somasundara Nayagar in his youth. Acclaimed as the father of the Pure Tamil movement, which sought to emphasize the independence and self-reliance of the Tamil language, his books also provided one of the bases for the formulation of the Dravidian ideology. As we shall see in the course of this paper he played a leading part in the conflicts between the Saivites and the Self-Respect Movement.
3. See the entries dated 27 May 1928, 5 June 1928, 16 June 1928, 26 June 1928, and 29 June 1928 (henceforth *MAD*). Maraimalai Adigal maintained his diaries in English from 1898 till his death in 1950. See A.R. Venkatachalapathy (ed.), *Maraimalai Adigalar Natkurippugal*, Madras, 1988. I am grateful to R. Muthukumaraswamy, Managing Director, Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society for the opportunity to edit these diaries. The hypothesis put forward in this paper was first formulated during the course of editing the diaries.
4. J.S. Kannappar was also a student of Maraimalai Adigal.
5. Satchidanandam Pillai emphasized this. The point being made is that Brahmins are not part of the Tamil people.
6. Saivites wore *thiruvенеeru* or sacred ash on their forehead which constitutes a very important mark of their religion.
7. This threefold classification is drawn from the insightful observations

of *Kumoran* (28 March 1928) and *Siddhantam* (May 1929); the latter actually used the English terms 'conservatives', 'moderates', and 'radicals' in parenthesis.

8. For the full text of the proceedings and resolutions of the Tirunelveli Conference, see *Siddhantam*, April 1929; *Navasakti*, 3 April 1929; *Sivanesan*, March–April 1929.
9. P. Chidambaram Pillai's address to the meet, *Suyamariyathaiyum Saivamum*, Erode, 1935, was published only many years later. But an English version of it was serialized in *Revolt* every week, from 18 August to 22 September 1929. The articles were signed 'PCP'.
10. In 1935, there was a debate between M. Raghavaiyangar and S. Somasundara Bharati over a stanza in *Tolkappiyam*, the ancient Tamil book of grammar, concerning the institution of marriage. The debate generated much heat. The Self-Respect Movement sided with S. Somasundara Bharati's refutation of Raghavaiyangar's pro-Brahmin interpretation.
11. Incidentally, the Saiva Vellalars do not find a place in the list of backward castes.

Intimations of Equality

Shrines and Politics in Malabar 1900–1924*

DILIP M. MENON

Caste inequality, unlike the Baker confronted by the Snark, has not softly and suddenly vanished away in the face either of modernization or of determined academic writing. Rural relations of hierarchy and dependence have survived despite the onslaught of a market economy. If anything, issues have become more complicated, and a welter of identities characterize social relations and infect the trajectory of political discourse. And the long march from caste to class is far from complete. This paper is concerned with two related issues—the creation of identities and their transformation. Notions of identity and community are studied as transient categories emphasized within particular contexts, rather than as something intent awaiting realization. We look at two specific contexts: the enaction of rural religious festivals within a hierarchical caste society, and the projection of the idea of a community of equals by lower-caste movements and, subsequently, nationalism. Social and political movements sought to create broader identifications—of caste, religion, and nationality—in the attempt to break free from what they saw as structures of inequality rooted in local contexts. In the process,

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conceptions of rural relations, labour, and religious worship underwent considerable modification, if not transformation. It is significant that all these attempts to redefine status expressed themselves in a religious idiom, stemming from a recognition that religious practices almost as much as economic ones constitute the individual in society. Even within *home economicus* may lurk a devout heart.

Nayar *Tharavadu* and the Organisation of Production

The East India Company wrested Malabar from Tipu Sultan in 1792, but it was not until 1806, with the defeat of the Pazhassi raja, that the last flicker of resistance was quelled. Nayar *tharavadu*, or matrilineal households, had managed to carve out areas of influence with the opening up of forests following the warfare of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹ In north Malabar, agricultural production and settlement came to be centred on dominant families which had pioneered cultivation and established a tenuous, and therefore, furiously defended, control over wasteland. Over the nineteenth century, the legal profile of the Nayar *tharavadu* was consolidated, and it came to be defined as an impartible and co-residential unit (eventually decided by the Madras High Court in 1867).² The younger members were entitled to maintenance from the income of the *tharavadu* from its lands. Therefore, in north Malabar, where land was available for colonization and profits from pepper were high, *tharavadu* continued to expand into the interior by setting up branches called *tavazhis*, each tracing descent from a female member of the parent *tharavadu*. Such branches were allocated land on improving tenures, and they constituted the cutting edge of the extension of cultivation.

The expansion of dominant *tharavadu* into the interior brought them into contact with the shifting cultivation practised by tribal groups who produced hill-rice and pepper on the foothills. Their random, migratory cultivation was brought under the control of Nayar *tharavadu* under a system called *cherikallu*. Younger members of the *tharavadu* were allotted an expanse of forest and, with a Maniyani tribal as supervisor, trees were cleared for the cultivation of pepper and hill rice.³ Shifting cultivators who were not part of the *cherikallu* system changed their designation according to the name of the *tharavadu*

from which they had leased their land. Subordinate labouring groups were closely identified with the dominant families they worked for. However, in a context of land availability, this implied more a temporary association for obtaining loans and grain subsidies than a permanent dissolution of identity. Vettuvar tribals worked on the coconut plantations of Nayers and other castes and were sometimes employed on the fields during the harvest. They observed death pollution for a period of fifteen days if working on a Nayar's gardens and for ten days if on a Nambudiri's. Their identities were seen as being coterminous with that of their landlords. But again, this depended on whom they were working for at a particular juncture. These tribal groups could leave if treated harshly, and their lack of 'loyalty' to their masters made their names (*nambuvettuvar*) 'synonymous with ingratitude', according to Panikkar, an early amateur anthropologist.⁴ Systematic encroachment on the preserves of the tribals, combined with the attempts at forest conservancy by the government, had already caused the migration of families of tribals northwards to Mysore and Coorg.⁵

Rural settlement tended to be centred on a Nayar or Tiyya *tharavadu*, and the lands and labourers it commanded. More specifically, the word *tharavadu* meant the family house, the land where the ashes of the ancestors lay (which was usually within the compound of the house).⁶ It incorporated both the immediate members of the *tharavadu* and labourers working on its lands who were identified with the *tharavadu* they worked for. Around each major *tharavadu* there were families of oil-pressers, washer-people, potters, and barbers who held hereditary rights and privileges in the produce as well as the family and local shrine.⁷ Traditionally, Nayar *tharavadu* charged a tax called *kudicillara* which was collected on the implements of the profession of potters, blacksmiths, and other artisans.⁸ Some of the dominant Nayar *tharavadu* had Tiyya retainers called *adiyans* who rendered service in personal quarrels, acted as the private armies of landlords, and 'policed' the castes below them to prevent any infringement of caste mores.⁹

Alongside the exercise of authority, *tharavadu* espoused a paternalist benevolence towards lower-caste dependants. During the new-year festival of Vishu, in the month of April, Nayar families made a great show of generosity in which dependants were given presents of

grain, cloth, and money. Donations, and the sharing, of grain were a theme running through religious festivals as well. The guarantee of subsistence was the premise of a negotiated sense of community in a region deficient in foodgrains. Labourers were expected to make presents of their produce as an expression of allegiance. Reciprocity was not symmetrical and dependants could be evicted from holdings or, in extreme cases, killed if such tokens of fealty were not given.¹⁰ Such instances were either more or less evident according to the nature of relations between a particular *tharavadu* and its dependants. It is significant that the incidence of petty crime, and the practice of 'black magic' by untouchable castes, was minimal in villages where *tharavadu* were regarded as 'benevolent'.¹¹

The connection between work and status was most clearly evident in the case of the untouchable castes of Pulayas and Cherumas who mainly worked on the paddy fields. They were named by the *tharavadu* to which they were attached. At best a Pulayan would be called by a name like Panjan, meaning someone who works on wetlands, and at worst by names which meant 'nothing', which produced its own ambivalences, particularly in their perceived association with 'black magic'. The Parayas, at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, were regarded as powerful magicians, and were consulted by all castes in matters relating to thefts and the killing of enemies.¹³ Magic was a sphere of activity in which the Parayan outranked even the Nambudiri Brahmans, some of whom practised sorcery without a loss in status.¹⁴

The economy of north Malabar in the three decades prior to the Depression of the 1930s was characterized by two trends. The first was the growth of a class of entrepreneurial small cultivators, premised on the availability of land and the high prices of cash crops, like coconut and pepper. The second trend, later heightened by the Depression, was the increasing dependence of these cultivators on the large landowning *tharavadu* of the region both for subsistence as well as access to land. North Malabar was a region deficient in foodgrains, a fact which had been accentuated by the conversion of wetlands to cash cropping in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The production of subsistence crops like paddy came to be concentrated in the hands of a few, large, landowning *tharavadu*, whose granaries underpinned their authority. Control exercised by the *tharavadu* over wastelands

and forests introduced a further element of dependence.¹⁵

Landlords in Malabar were given wider control over wastelands and forests than elsewhere in the Presidency. In the landmark Olappamana case of 1916, the ownership of non-tidal and non-navigable rivers was vested in the owners of the banks on either side of the river.¹⁶ In the years before the Depression, control over the ancillaries of agriculture did not necessarily mean that landlords were able to liberate themselves from the bonds of community and custom. Rights over land were constantly being contested with other landholders and recalcitrant tenants who refused to forgo their customary interests in the land. Migration always existed as an option. After cultivating fields in July and August, many labourers migrated to the plantations in Coorg and returned soon before the harvest.¹⁷ Migrants from Malabar—presumably mainly untouchables and lower castes—made up some three-fifths of the outsiders working in Cochin, where they often became permanent residents.¹⁸

With the prices of pepper and coconut soaring in the 1920s, the small cultivator producing for the market came to the fore. This degree of integration into the market did not necessarily mean the undermining of patronal, reciprocal relations between large *tharavadu* and dependant labourers and cultivators.¹⁹ Given the nature of the fluctuating profits from cash crops, determined by the vagaries of international demand, which financed the import of rice into the region,²⁰ cultivators relied on the *tharavadu* for the provision of subsistence. This underlay a sense of rural community, fraught with tension, in which cultivators expected that they would be provided for in a time of food crisis, and allowed access to agricultural resources. This expectation was offset by the ability, or the willingness, of *tharavadu* to fulfil their obligations.²¹

To sum up, the *tharavadu* was involved in a network of relationships with a welter of agrarian entities—shifting cultivators, tenant cultivators on homesteads, artisanal groups who held land in return for services, ritual performers who held rent-free land from shrines or temples managed by *tharavadu*, and untouchable castes who worked on the paddy fields. The latter's dependence on the *tharavadu* ranged from the peripheral (cash and seed advances) as in the case of the shifting cultivators, to the absolute as in the case of the untouchable castes. At the centre of these fluctuating relations stood the *pathayapura*

'granary' of the *tharavadu*, representing the possibility of a still point in a chaotic world.²² The promise of sustenance represented as much the idea of a 'share' in the crop as a rational consideration on the part of the *tharavadu* to secure labour at a time of availability of land and shortage of a workforce. It would be sentimental to speak in terms of a 'golden age' of labour, as any notion of 'rights' and 'shares' was hard fought for and won, often temporarily.

Shrines and Religious Culture

The current orthodoxy on religious festivals in South India tends to see them both as a microcosm of social relations and as the means by which such relations are reproduced. Rules of caste hierarchy and behaviour are elaborated at temple festivals which then help to keep the 'system', so to speak, functioning. Within temple rituals, specific functions are allocated to castes which signify their position in the hierarchy. The relation between the deity and the worshippers parallels and is the model for the relation between higher and lower castes and more generally between superior and inferior.²³ Too little attention has been paid to Stein's judicious formulation that a temple is a 'complex and *transitory* outcome of an extraordinary range of relationships'.²⁴ An argument needs to be constructed which allows for dissonance and difference, and assumes that individuals may be involved in several religious and social practices, not all of which purvey the unitary idea of a hierarchical society. Some religious festivals may assert, at particular junctures, hierarchy and the interdependence of castes. Others may convey an altogether different conception of social relations.

The assumption of the existence of options within any given 'system', in which a host of identities is asserted and transformed at different points in time, would make our understanding of social change more nuanced. We shall look at community worship around shrines in the context of the articulation of social relations as well as of the formation of identities. Looking at a religious culture which is shared by both upper and lower castes but understood, and appropriated, differently over time, will help in historicizing the experience of culture.²⁵ We shall consider the community of worshippers around local shrines in north Malabar, supported by dominant Nayar and Tiyya families and the other castes living around the shrine.

A major Nayar family usually held management rights over several temples, each of which was supported by lands endowed for its maintenance.²⁶ Tenants paid their rents in paddy; and the priest, ritual dancer, drummer, and other officiants were maintained out of these payments, with a certain share going to the Nayar household. The sphere of overlordship, *melkoyma*, was knitted with the rights to *uraima*—the right of regulating and administering the affairs of the local temples and shrines. Control over a temple did not mean only control over an imagined or actual community of worshippers; it also meant access to the stocks of grain a temple commanded, thus underwriting the authority of a family. Shrines and temples amassed considerable stocks; the annual rent at one of the temples of the Koothali Nayar in Kurumbranad was well over 32,000 bushels of grain.²⁷

The basic distinction between temples (*kshetrams*) and shrines (*kavus*) was that only the Nayar landholders and Nambudiri Brahmans were allowed to pray at the former. *Kavus* were of various kinds, but generally they were the focus of worship of a community of lower and upper castes, within a region defined by the overlordship of the dominant family or families managing the shrine. Shrines were the characteristic site of worship, and in 1881, of the 240 religious institutions belonging to superior castes, only 45 were to be found in north Malabar.²⁸ A large majority of the temples was owned by individual families or managed by the heads of dominant families (*uralar*) in the vicinity.²⁹ The Koothali Nayar, one of the big landowners of Kurumbranad, had the right of overlordship over four temples, and the tenants who held paddy lands from these temples paid their rent in kind. The settlement register for Karivellur in 1904 gives the details of lands held by twelve temples and eleven shrines. Both service and ritual castes were given wet or garden lands on rent-free *janmam* to maintain themselves.³⁰ Some of the temples belonging to dominant families were private temples in the sense that only members of the extended family could and did worship there. Officiants at these temples were usually senior members of the family who gave themselves up to religious contemplation after having led a full life.³¹ In other family temples, annual ceremonies were held, at which all the castes were permitted to attend, and alcohol and meat were considered a part of the religious celebration. On such occasions

alone, Brahman priests officiated and used fish and toddy in the rituals. Since most of the temples were devoted to Siva or *shakti*, the use of alcohol and meat was common.³²

Very often, the deity at a family temple (Siva, Vishnu or Bhagavathi) was merged with a local deity. This was typically a corollary of the expansion of the frontiers of cultivation by *tharavadu*. At Pandit-code, in a temple managed by the Koothali family, the tribal goddess of the mountains, Payyoramala *paradevata*, was worshipped alongside Siva. Questions of cognition are difficult to resolve, but it is possible that over a period of time these two entities might have merged. Siva would have become as much a folk deity as the Payyoramala *devata* was a goddess of the Nayers. This merging of the gods of the upper-caste landholders with those of the lower-caste or tribal adherents was evident. In every Nayar household, some form of ancestor worship was practised, the most common being the setting apart of a room in the house as the abode of the ancestors. The symbol of the ancestor—a sword if the person had been of a martial temperament, and beads and slippers if they had been spiritually oriented—was worshipped in an outhouse, with one of the males of the family acting as priest. Sometimes, these family shrines were thrown open to the public if offerings to the ancestor were seen as effective in preventing or curing diseases. In times of epidemics (smallpox continued to be prevalent in Malabar as late as the 1940s), the shrine of the Nayar ancestor and therefore the household itself became a focus of the community.³³

Some Nayar households set up an ancestor in a local shrine merging the family cult with a local cult. The reverse could happen when local heroes and heroines, usually lower-caste victims of perceived injustice at the hands of members of the household, were deified and worshipped along with Nayar ancestors.³⁴ Thus, at the same time as Nayar households attempted to increase their sphere of authority by transposing their ancestors in local shrines, they themselves had constantly to attest their legitimacy by 'atoning' for excesses committed. Deceased ancestors, local heroes and heroines, gods of the Vedic pantheon, and nature gods all rubbed shoulders in a seamless web of worship. Shared worship defined a sense of community to some extent but the dissonances were evident, making a feeling of fraternity transitory. The deification of local victims of injustice clearly indicated the asymmetry in access to power. At the same time, the

limits of the exercise of power were defined. The shrines were the locus of the articulation of relations of power as well as its contestation. If lower castes were beginning to worship higher deities, upper castes had to acknowledge lower deities, and a community of worship was sustained by this tension between integration and further expansion.³⁵ Historians and anthropologists, working within different theoretical paradigms, accept that lower-caste culture consists of replication and imitation of the dominant culture of the upper castes.³⁶ Looking at the whole process of the formation, expansion, and intermingling of the shrines of Nayar ancestors, goddesses, and local heroes and heroines, the social order seems far more dynamic and less amenable to a subsuming theory.

Religious Festivals and Social Relations

We shall now look at three kinds of festival. In the first, the possibility of a community of equals was stressed over difference. A community of interdependent yet unequal castes around dominant Nayar households and local shrines was emphasized in the second. In the third, the premise of power underlying social relations was recognized and the excessive deployment of authority was criticized.

The festival at the shrine in Kottiyur provides an illustration of the first kind. The Kottiyur shrine was kept closed throughout the year except for a brief period between 15 May and 11 June. Situated in the Wynaad foothills, the shrine was virtually inaccessible in the months of July and August because the severe monsoon caused mountain streams to flood and submerge the shrine. The shrine was managed by a few Nayar families in the vicinity. Pilgrims who travelled there were of all castes and initially followed an order of precedence; the Nayars arrived first, followed by the Tiyyas, and so on. Between 21 and 24 May, the Tiyyas would bring the traditional offering of tender coconuts and pots of toddy. On the way to the shrine it was customary to 'insult anyone they came across' and cause damage to property beside the pilgrimage route.

Once the Nayars, Tiyyas, and other castes reached the shrine, they abused one another, sang bawdy songs, and occasionally came to blows. Worship was tempered with gaiety as the pots of toddy were diverted for secular consumption.³⁷ A similar festival was held in the month of

April at the Kodungallur temple in the neighbouring state of Cochin. Nayars and lower castes from north Malabar made a pilgrimage to the temple, and once there drank alcohol, sacrificed cocks and goats, and sang lewd songs about the goddess of the temple as well as hapless passers-by. A reformer's pamphlet of the early twenties revels in descriptions of drunken orgies laced with sexual innuendo.³⁸

Before the Kottiyur festival began, a Tiyya would perform worship at the shrine; only after this were Nayars and Nambudiris allowed inside. The chief representative of the Nambudiris paid a certain amount of money as *dakshina* (offering) to the Tiyya priest and received charge of the temple from him. On the last day of the festival, a washerman performer in the guise of the mountain god Muthappan 'arrived' near Kottiyur and was received by a Nambudiri priest who offered him sandalwood paste.³⁹ The caste hierarchy seemingly was stood on its head here, and upper castes could worship only after receiving permission from a Tiyya. Similarly, a washerman, exalted on account of being possessed by a deity (significantly, a non-Brahmanical deity), was temporarily superior to a Brahman. The specific context blurred questions of hierarchy and allowed for the adoption of roles which did not replicate everyday norms of behaviour. The Nambudiri Brahman offered *dakshina* to a Tiyya, reversing the kind of 'transaction' usually seen as obtaining between 'higher' and 'lower', in which 'grosser material elements go up' from those of lower status and 'more refined symbolic elements go down' from those of higher status.⁴⁰

If these festivals were occasions in which the relationship between castes bore little resemblance to the presumed hierarchy, another characteristic was that there was no presumed community around the shrines. Both at Kottiyur and Kodungallur, the imagined terrain of worshippers theoretically embraced all of Malabar. In the crowds which surged to these festivals anonymity was the key feature, and joint participation as pilgrims the unifying factor. At festivals associated with particular shrines in the countryside, there was less anonymity and the premise was of different castes working together. If, in the case of the pilgrimage, it was worship and licence which bound together the participants, at local shrines it was a community of worship and of sustenance in dearth. As both these aggregates were transitory and had as a background the unequal relations of power, the identities adopted in the duration of such festivals were necessarily temporary as well.

The roles performed by different castes in the rituals associated with temple festivals emphasized their casteness, so to speak, but it was probably, only within the community of worship that such identities were retained.

The temple festival at Pishari *kavu*, near the port town of Quilandy in Kuttambranad, illustrates the second kind of festival, which reiterated both caste identity and community. Pishari *kavu* is an instance of a local shrine which, over a period of time, has come to be controlled by Nayars, but yet retains the title of *kavu* because all castes participate in its festival. In the temple, worship was done by a Mussad (Nambudiri) and entry was prohibited to castes below the Nayars. However, during temple festivals, washermen, tribals, and oracles were an integral part of the ceremonies. Most of the ritual officiants and religious performers held rent-free land from the temple, and the annual yield from the small plots provided a bare subsistence.

During the course of the festival, each caste performed the role traditionally associated with them—the blacksmith repaired the temple sword, the umbrella-maker supplied umbrellas, the fisher-people brought salt from the coast, and the Tiyyas brought coconut and toddy. In one sense, their participation in different capacities in the ritual could have meant the establishment of a direct connection between work and status. Equally, the community of worship and of subsistence which sustained the temple was asserted. It was quite common for the temples to be supported by the donations of produce from worshippers, particularly in festivals coinciding with the harvest in April. At the main temple in Taliparamba, the *puttari* festival was held after each harvest. Worshippers of all castes and tenants of the temple or of the managing families would bring offerings of grain and vegetables.⁴¹

The devotees received quantities of rice as offerings from the temple and the Nayar households of the locality donated rice to the temple. Festival processions took a definite route which embraced the presumed sphere of religious authority of the temple and the secular authority of the Nayar families. Every temple festival was thus a reiteration of the community of worship as well as of subsistence, marked by the giving and receiving of paddy. Just as the roles performed by each of the castes were emphasized, so was the duty of the Nayar household and the temple to provide for the community of worshippers. It

would be simplistic to argue that such temple festivals reiterated and reproduced caste hierarchy or caste identity for they were but one of the several religious practices that individuals were involved in. Moreover, it would be possible to argue even in the case of the 'service castes' that their participation in the temple festivals emphasized more their dependence on the dominant families than their 'caste' status.⁴²

It is worth stressing here that the network of reciprocal relations around the shrines was not premised solely on the ability of the *tharavadu* or the shrines to provide sustenance. A congregation was guaranteed both by the statement of devotion to the deity and by the fact that there was a residual component of regard for the *tharavadu* itself regardless of its fortunes. Two examples will suffice. In 1939, shrines belonging to the Koothali *tharavadu* were escheated after the death of the last living member of the family. Within the year, there were petitions from the local inhabitants to the Collector asking for the shrine festivals to be restored.⁴³ In the second instance, the Ecchikanam *tharavadu* was in the doldrums, hit hard by the Depression as well as by the partition of its properties. Its head, A.C. Kannan Nayar, was dependent on the charity of his Congress associates. In 1947, he recorded in his diary the holding of a religious festival at his shrine from which he realised a 'profit' of Rs 475 from donations made by worshippers.⁴⁴ We need to reconsider the view that rural social structures, of both authority and co-operation, fell apart in the course of the Depression, since the impecuniousness of landed elites rendered them incapable of performing erstwhile functions of credit or sustenance.⁴⁵ Rural society appears to be bound together by affective as much as 'rational' economic considerations on the part of its constituents.

Temple festivals were marked by the accent on interdependence and caste identity. Pilgrimages aspired to submerge caste identity. The ritual dance called the *teyyattam* had elements of both. The *teyyattam* was performed at shrines managed exclusively by Tiyya families, service castes, fisher-people, and untouchable castes like the Pulayas. Nayar landlords of the immediate locality were deemed to be members of the religious community, and though they never worshipped at these shrines, they had an important role to play in the annual festivals. The *teyyattam* was performed at shrines mainly by washermen and Malayan and Munnuttan tribals. It was a performance which incorporated the telling of the story of a lower- or upper-caste victim of perceived

injustice as well as the circumstances of their deification. Shrines grew up around these deified victims who were never worshipped in person but incorporated within local cults, existing Bhagavathi shrines or the worship of ancestors in Nayar households. Performances were always localized geographically, and, if the plot of land where a *teyyattam* was performed was sold, it was up to the new purchaser to continue holding the ceremony.⁴⁶ This level of shrines served as physical markers of an imagined area of community as well as reminders of the ever-present relations of power.

The incorporation of local heroes, the ancestors of the Nayar families, and the Bhagavathi in the sphere of worship defined a cosmology particular to every household-shrine complex. The distinctive form of worship at these shrines also emphasised the conviviality of the religious community. Toddy and meat were an essential part of the ceremonies and very often the performer himself was stoked up with alcohol. The essential spiritual ideal in all the ceremonies seems to have been not so much the transcendence of the world as enjoyment within it.

During a performance of the *teyyattam*, the performer (*kolam*) was possessed by the spirit of the local hero or heroine who had been deified as a form of the *Bhagavathi* or Siva. While the *kolam* was waiting to be possessed by the deity, the *thottam* was sung relating the circumstances of the life and death of the deified victims. The word *thottam* is derived from the word *thonnuka*, meaning to create.⁴⁷ At times, the performer himself was called the *thottam*, no distinction being made between the creator and his creation. During the space of the performance, the hero or heroine was brought alive in the body of the *kolam*, who was at the same time possessed by the deity. The *kolam* therefore, was at the same time human as well as divine; the creator as well as the creation; lower caste as well as a god. While in a state of possession, he castigated the upper-caste members of the audience for acts of commission and omission towards their servants or labourers. In a sense the performance was a lengthy rebuke; the retelling of the story of the unjust killing of a person of lower caste was a criticism of the power exercised by upper castes in general. During the period of the performance, Nambudiri and Nayar landlords would seek the advice of the performer as it was believed that his prophecies as well as his curses came true.⁴⁸

An important strand which emerges from the *teyyattam* is that of a notion of a moral community—a recognition of mutual spaces and the resentment of the arbitrary exercise of power. Neither the dominant households nor their labourers or dependent castes, or indeed the amorphous community of worshippers were expected to transgress certain limits. It is significant that *thottams* usually began with the performer saying, 'I do not know the name of the village [where the incident happened] that I could inform or enlighten you. I do not know the name of the person.'⁴⁹ This stanza, taken from the *thottam* of Vishnumurti (an incarnation of Vishnu) into which is woven the story of a Tiyya youth murdered by a Nayar landlord, is suggestive. It is as if there is an incipient understanding of the fact that regardless of the person or place, a Tiyya or Pulaya would have experienced the oppression of a landlord. Moreover, by not specifying a person or place, the story carried by the wandering Malayan performer would begin to assume the status of a 'type', allowing for a filling-in of detail in different localities. A collective memory of incidents was created, scattered in time and place, but flattened into the moment of the performance.

We have been looking at three different creations of community. The first was premised on a conflation of caste identities at the festivals at Kottiyur and Kodungallur. The second laid emphasis on the interdependence of the various castes as well as the community of worshippers premised on religion and subsistence. The third was a more fragile sense of community premised on unequal relations of power. This was recognized in the deification of lower-caste victims. The limits put on individual actions which facilitated the continuance of community were set out at the same time. What was common to all three was the absence of boundaries between 'high' and 'low' worship. Alcohol and blood sacrifice were part of both upper- and lower-caste culture, and the deities worshipped spanned cosmologies. The murdered Tiyya youth, Palantayi Kannan, was as much a part of the Nayar pantheon as Vishnumurti was of the lower-caste pantheon. Because of this constant process of dissemination it becomes very difficult to speak of social change in terms of imitation, that is 'sanskritization', as Srinivas does.⁵⁰ Over a period of time the boundaries between beliefs, practices, and deities became blurred, and in north Malabar there arose a composite culture shared by upper

and lower castes. The religious cosmology was defined as much by the lower castes as by the upper castes: the assimilation of local heroes and heroines and Nayar ancestors in a shared pantheon of worship.

The community of worship around the shrines possessed ambivalent characteristics. Some religious practices emphasised 'casteness' and the place of castes within a hierarchy, while others afforded a vision of a sphere in which all castes mingled without difference. Coupled with this was the fact that, in times of dearth, the shrine community was dependent on the stocks of grain held by the shrine and the dominant Nayar household which managed it. An unequivocal rejection of the shrine-centred sphere of worship would be problematic for its constituents. The rest of the paper looks at the attempts of reformers to move away from this shrine community either to set up parallel structures or to integrate the various levels within the religious hierarchy. The masses were to be drummed to the temples which had allowed entry only to the upper castes. The community of worship was sought to be extended by flattening all variation and thus bringing about an equality between castes in the sphere of worship.

The Emergence of Lower-Caste Protest

The primary attributes underlying the shrine festivals were of tension and ambivalence. They held forth the possibility both of the effacing of hierarchy, albeit temporarily, and of the entrenchment of caste roles. It was this tension which lay at the heart of attempts towards social change in the early decades of the twentieth century. We shall look at the emergence of a new lower-caste elite, which derived its status from government employment, the legal profession and commerce. It tried to underwrite its status in the towns by founding temples and trying to wean existing communities of worship from rural shrines. The efforts drew upon and paralleled similar movements in the countryside, fuelled by diverse motives, among sections within both upper and lower castes. Worship at shrines was to be eschewed in order to break with the entrenchment of caste roles at their festivals, and to move towards an equal community of worship around the new temples.

Underlying this religious idiom were questions of secular influence at the level of the locality, and the attempt to create, within largely urban areas, new orbits of power paralleling those of the households

in the countryside. The new temples and shrines were situated in and around the towns of Tellicherry and Cannanore, and were partly the reflection of the attempts at self-definition of a new caste elite. They tried to reclaim those aspects of the rural shrine community which allowed for equality between the constituents, though some of course were to remain more equal than others. This elite made a seemingly paradoxical summons to unity. It called upon people in the name of caste (which for a large number was rooted in the local context of worship and production) in order to do away with it altogether.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the Tiyyas were, in the words of the Malabar District Gazetteer, coming to be regarded as 'one of the most progressive classes in India'.⁵¹ They were among the first to join the network of elementary and high schools which the Basel Evangelical Mission had set up by the end of the nineteenth century.⁵² Some had worked their way into the colonial administration as *tehsildars*, lawyers, pleaders, sub-judges and up to the ranks of deputy collectors.⁵³ In the early nineteenth century, before the pressure of realizing more revenue had led to the formation of the Excise Department, the rights to sell and tap toddy had been auctioned under the auspices of the Revenue Department of the Government of Madras. Speculators and contractors were given a free hand in administering this ramshackle system, and sections among the Tiyyas, who monopolized the toddy-tapping profession, created informal empires criss-crossing the countryside. Moreover, Tiyya tenants on garden lands had benefited by the amendment to the Malabar Compensation for Tenants' Improvements Act which was passed in 1900. The amendment necessitated the payment of compensation to the tenant before eviction, which, in a period of burgeoning cash crop prices, created a class of de facto tenants on garden lands.⁵⁴

Tiyya tenants prospered with the increasing prices for pepper and coconut from the turn of the century, and began to invest in small tile and weaving factories in the towns. During the First World War, the rise in demand from the armed forces for cloth gave a fillip to the establishment of weaving factories in north Malabar. These were mainly ramshackle enterprises employing between five and ten men.⁵⁵ Increasingly, Tellicherry and Cannanore began attracting petty traders, casual labourers, and weavers from the hinterland. In 1909, C. Krishnan founded the Calicut Bank, which catered primarily for

other Tiyya professionals and merchants. Unlike the other established banks, money was lent primarily on the security of promissory notes and pledged ornaments. Over the years, its activity was extended to the financing of small tea-shops and stalls set up in the towns.⁵⁶

While opportunities for employment and credit in the towns along the coast increased, this in no sense precipitated a large-scale movement away from the villages. Labourers continued to live as they had done earlier with a foot in two worlds. Towns had always acted as a source of casual work during the agricultural slack season and thus helped to supplement rural incomes. Most individuals continued to cling on to their small homesteads with palm and jack trees. Moreover, even while they were employed on the fields, labourers made coir from the husk of the coconut and bartered it for rice, chillies, and other necessities in the market. Some banks along the coast were willing to lend money on the mortgage of coir yarn.⁵⁷ Until 1931, agricultural wages in the interior remained high and even those who migrated to more lucrative employment in the plantations of Coorg returned home within two years.⁵⁸ Similarly, the difference between the average wage of a worker in the factory and a cottage worker was too small to induce the latter to abandon home for the factory.⁵⁹

There were reasons why work in the factories was not necessarily seen as a more attractive proposition. Mills employing 200 to 300 workers were usually owned by locally powerful landowners who treated the villages under their control as a catchment area for labour.⁶⁰ Workers in these mills experienced the same degree of physical abuse as they would have in the fields, probably even more, confined as they were within a limited environment. Physical attacks on workers by the management often provided the point of entry for early trade-union organizers.⁶¹ The strict regimen and cramped conditions in factories did not appeal to many. A satirical pamphlet of 1916 compared work in a saw-mill favourably with work in the fields. The author had so much time on his hands in the mill that he could watch the beautiful young women at work ('I do not lie when I say that such women cannot be found anywhere else in the world'), and gamble at cards, winning such amounts that 'the debts at home [were] being paid off.'⁶² Lastly, the new tile factories and saw-mills were an uncertain source of employment. They were both at the mercy of the monsoons; heavy rains rendered brick kilns useless, and prevented the drying of

bricks. On the other hand a poor monsoon meant that logs could not be floated down river to the saw-mills. Moreover, with the rush of would-be entrepreneurs into such ventures, there was a crisis of overproduction by 1920. This soon became a chronic condition until the Depression and the slump in foreign demand put the majority of these small factories out of business.⁶³

Changing circumstances and widening opportunities produced, however, redefinitions of work and its relation to status. In the two decades before the Depression, there was a considerable outflow of emigrants to the tea estates in Ceylon and rubber plantations in Malaya.⁶⁴ Many of the lower-caste migrants who returned to Malabar found themselves at odds with local authority and notions of hierarchy. Their experience of anonymity and, therefore, a degree of equality, in the countries where they had worked underlay their censure of the relation between low casteness and their erstwhile occupations. A pamphlet of 1927 spoke of the 'absence of caste in Singapore, Penang, and even in savage Africa.'⁶⁵ Many others saw the prospect of education, or the experience of it, as the panacea for all inequality. As an artisan pamphleteer wrote in 1911, 'The foundations of the world, in all ages and for all persons, regardless of religion or caste, rest on two things—education and wealth'.⁶⁶ Meetings of the Araya Mahajana Sabha (Fishermen's Congress) in 1920 asserted that their salvation 'depended on education and education alone'.⁶⁷ Conservatives were beginning to fear that, with the younger generation of 'cobblers, carpenters' and others increasingly going in for elementary education, instead of learning their hereditary trade, 'special classes of people would become utterly extinct'.⁶⁸

Just as the increased availability of alternatives generated debates about work and status, the emergence of protest movements contributed to further redefinitions. This was particularly evident in the case of the Tiyyas, who as an emergent elite sought to distance themselves from the association of their caste with the profession of toddy-tapping. At the same time Tiyya tenants and labourers attempted to move out of the relations of deference within the network of households and shrines in the countryside. Some among them sought part-time employment in the towns to assert their independence, at the same time as moving into newer circuits of dependence, particularly those of credit being established by Tiyya elites in the towns. All these diverse

trends were wafted along on the winds blowing from the princely state of Travancore to the south.

The Ezhavas, caste compatriots of the Tiyyas, were undergoing a similar economic and social surge forward but they were denied access to both higher education and government employment.⁶⁹ Sri Narayana Guru, an Ezhava with a knowledge of Malayalam, Sanskrit, and Tamil, took the Ezhavas to a 'higher' realm of worship through the abandoning of animal sacrifice and the use of alcohol in worship. He insisted that the community distance itself from its lucrative, but what he defined as demeaning, involvement with the toddy trade. In 1903, the Guru's message was institutionalized in the SNDP Yogam. What was the social message of the SNDP Yogam and the Sri Narayana movement in Travancore? Firstly, it argued against differences in society based on caste. Narayana Guru made a direct connection between the 'low' social and religious practices of the Ezhavas and their low social status. They could attain equality with others by becoming like the upper castes. This idea found expression in the realm of worship in the setting up of Ezhava temples devoted to gods of the Brahmanical pantheon. The entrance to an equal society lay through common worship. Secondly, the SNDP Yogam sought to create self-esteem within the Ezhava community of building their economic strength and propagating a vigorous self-help ethic. The motto of the *Vivekadayam*, the house journal of the Yogam, was 'God helps those who help themselves.'⁷⁰

Resonances of the SNDP's message of equality and economic self-reliance can be found in the activities of the Tiyyas along the coast in north Malabar. However, the trajectory they took was slightly different. In July 1906, Kottieth Ramunni, a lawyer at the Tellicherry courts and K. Chantan, a retired deputy collector, founded the Sri Gnanodaya Yogam (the Society for the Awakening of Knowledge). Two years later, the Yogam proposed the building of a temple for the Tiyyas of north Malabar to which they alone would have access. In 1908, Narayana Guru himself laid the foundation of the Jagannatha temple at Tellicherry. By 1916, two more temples had been built; the Srikanteswara at Calicut and the Sundareswara at Cannanore. From the very beginning the new temples represented a departure from the idea of community envisaged by the rural shrines. All of them were financed wholly by donations from prosperous Tiyyas, and the

names of the prominent donors were inscribed on tablets put up on the walls.⁷¹ What these temples needed was to gain general acceptance and adherents who could sustain the temple with something more tangible than worship. There were two immediate constraints to contend with. First, the new community could only be a limited one both because Nayars would not worship at what were seen as Tiyya establishments, and Cherumas and Pulayas were prevented from doing so by the managers of the temple. Secondly, in both the countryside and the hinterland of the towns, Nayars, Tiyyas, and Pulayas were involved in a more universal, vital, and vibrant culture around shrines. The attempts to build temples by the Tiyya elites have been usually subsumed in the corpulent, all-embracing category of 'sanskritization'. Their main aim, according to the most recent interpretation, was to 'to obtain access to the high gods for lower castes'.⁷² However, it is not emulation which we are dealing with here, an idea which presumes a filtering downward of the ideas and practices of a social elite—the primary element of change in an otherwise static system. In the dynamic context of shrine worship and the cosmology of the *teyyattam*, categories of worship were miscible. Different castes had always had 'access' to all gods, ancestors, and spirits. When Siva or Vishnu, in their forms as Sundareswara and Jagannatha, were installed at Tiyya temples, it was less a move *up* a religious hierarchy as a move *sideways*. Local deities had always possessed this manifold aspect—the local hero Palantayi Kannan was also Vishnumurti and vice versa.

Shrines, dominant households and their adherents constituted the network of influence in the countryside. The Tiyya elite tried to create a parallel urban network around the Jagannatha temple at Tellicherry and the Sundareswara temple at Cannanore. What we have here is the desire of both caste elites and subordinates to distance themselves from the shared culture of the shrines, and set up an alternative religious culture nominally premised on community and equality. The temples attempted to unite Tiyyas at the level of the region, prayer societies at the level of the locality. Both these alternatives attempted to move away from that aspect of the earlier shrine community which emphasised caste roles.⁷³ Indeed, caste reformers redefined rural religious festivals so as to emphasize only those aspects which were seen to entrench caste identity. They were contending on two fronts in the towns. Not only did they have to draw away Tiyyas from existing orbits around shrines

in the towns and in the rural hinterland, they also had to compete for space with a flourishing Mappila community. The attempt to create a community around the temples was premised as much on conflicts over urban space between the Tiyya elites and commercial groups like the Mappilas investing in overleases in the towns had begun to acquire land near existing temples and shrines.⁷⁴ They established *srambis* (wayside shrines) and enlarged existing *srambis* into mosques where prayers were held on Fridays.

The triad of temples at Cannanore, Tellicherry, and Calicut was established by 1916, and two years later a Tiyya conference was held in Calicut. It called upon all Tiyyas to break away from worshipping at rural temples and shrines to which they supplied offerings but which denied them entrance. A resolution stated that there was an overwhelming 'need to eschew all ideas of the lowness of Tiyyas and the superiority of the upper castes'.⁷⁵ Sundareswara and Jagannatha temples were of, for, and by the Tiyyas, and it was here that the self-esteem of the community would be built. If the Jagannatha temple had to vie with other Tiyya shrines for worshippers then it needed to pull itself out of purely local circuits and aspire to become a centre of pilgrimage, like Kottiyur. By projecting itself as a rival pilgrimage centre, the Jagannatha temple could try to draw upon wider loyalties as well as strengthen the sense of Tiyya community. The Gnanodaya Yogam exhorted Tiyyas to make a pilgrimage to the Jagannatha temple rather than the one at Kottiyur. They represented it as the eschewing of toddy and blood sacrifices in rituals for a purer form of worship. In one sense it was an espousal of the teaching of Sri Narayana Guru. On the other hand, the adoption of rituals using clarified butter, milk and sugar (rather than palm jaggery), presumed the economic well-being of the worshippers.⁷⁶ A pamphlet contrasted the 'pure way' in which rites were performed at Jagannatha temple as a result of the influence of Narayana Guru: 'Without any mercy we killed cocks for worshipping God/ With the smell of blood, our temples had become like markets.'⁷⁷

Purists with sensitive nostrils, those who wished to display their wealth in their form of worship, and those who desired to make Jagannatha a Tiyya bastion: each of these for their different reasons began moving to Tellicherry. There was a steadily increasing trickle from the countryside for other reasons. The Kottiyur temple was managed by Nayar households, and large numbers of Tiyyas resented what they

saw as their subordinate position as suppliers of toddy and poultry to festivals. They began moving out of local spheres of obligation as well. In 1921, Tiyya tappers refused to take the traditional pots of toddy decorated with flowers and red silk to the festival in Chirakkal temple. Without mincing words, they described the festival 'as an occasion for the upper castes to get free liquor'.⁷⁸ However, this movement away from caste obligations was not uniform. In Puthur and Kalavallur *desams*, there were two groups among the Tiyyas, and the 'conservatives' were supported by and continued to work with the Nayar landlords.⁷⁹

In the course of two decades, a shared religious culture had undergone redefinition with those aspects which replicated caste inequality being stressed. At the same time the Tiyya elites projected the whole 'castes' of Tiyyas as a community apart and outside the pale of the Hindu religion.⁸⁰ It was an abstraction both from local identities and from broader definitions of inequality—of being lower castes within the Hindu fold. As we shall see, nationalist reformers would build upon the theme of caste inequality as being something entrenched in religion. The recasting of the relation between a *tharavadu* and its dependants was a significant corollary of the redefinition of popular religion. Subtle networks of obligation, reciprocity, and custom were now perceived and translated, in terms of the forced extraction of labour and the entrenchment of abject dependence. The Depression was to lend an edge to these indigenous redefinitions of 'labour'. 'Traditional' relations were to be undermined by the economic crisis which rendered *tharavadu* reluctant to fulfil obligations.⁸¹

Meanwhile, new arrangements further whittled away the old consensus, and promoted disaffection between Nayars and Tiyyas in the countryside. From the late nineteenth century, the Madras government had begun to tax the native liquor industry in an effort to raise more revenue. The informal, ramshackle, and cut-throat administration provided by the speculators and contractors was slowly replaced by an excise bureaucracy.⁸² From the very beginning, there was resistance, and Malabar consistently recorded the highest number of offenders against excise laws in the Madras Presidency.⁸³ The severe taxation policy of the government affected relations in the countryside to a considerable extent. Landlords and village officials were made responsible for rooting out excise crime, which vested further powers of coercion in their hands. This was translated into a conflict between

Nayar officials and Tiyya tappers, and was absorbed into existing local conflicts and assertions of power. Toddy-tappers were driven to the brink of temperance by excessive extractions—by the landlord, toddy-shop owner, contractors, and seemingly every excise official who encountered them on the roads.⁸⁴

The enforcement of *abkari* regulations distanced officials from the tappers, and the taxation policy closed down shops and areas where Nayars, Tiyyas, and Cherumas had shared their drunkenness. Tiyyas who quit the network of shrines were at the receiving end of the daily oppression of Nayar and other excise officials, and increasingly unwilling to carry on an expensive occupation. In September 1918, Kottieth Krishnan, K. Chantan and a few others associated with the new Tiyya temples, founded the Kerala Labour Union for toddy-tappers who had decided to give up their profession and take up the production of jaggery. In this instance, the economic hardship of the tappers, the possibility of shifting within the profession of tapping to producing something free of governmental exaction or social opprobrium, and the desire of the Tiyya leaders to win adherents to their temples, all came together.

Nationalism, Cleanliness, and Caste Status

The eschewing of both alcohol and blood-sacrifice in rituals, temperance, and the association of these with caste status, began to mesh with larger concerns. Nayar social reformers and nationalists joined the fray and transformed these issues by imbuing them with a 'civilizing' mission. The exercise of restraint in one's emotions as well as one's actions—the rejection of drunkenness and the violence implicit in blood sacrifices—came to be seen as the mark of civilisation. Just as the taxation policy of the excise department had removed one sphere of interaction between sections of the Nayars and lower castes, involvement with the Congress distanced another section among the Nayars from a space of common worship soaked, in their eyes, with toddy and blood. Worship at shrines was slowly being eschewed in favour of the purer worship at temples. Moreover, markers of inequality would be effaced by the adoption of cleanliness as the motif that would level all difference. With the entry of the Congress, the movement away from the shrines was knitted with the

idea of equality in the theme of temple entry—clean Hindus would enter the portals of the temples as equals. Here again, the idea of a religious community of equals was maintained; it was an expansion of the original idea put forward by the Tiyyas and, again, a wider secular unity was not conceived of. Civilisation, cleanliness, and equality were the watchwords of the age.

The Indian National Congress had included temperance in its political programme as early as the Allahabad session in 1888. Bipin Chandra Pal developed the attack on alcohol as a polemic against the British government which realized revenue by keeping the Indian population in a state of inebriation.⁸⁵ Gandhi's visit to Malabar with Shaukat Ali in the cause of non-co-operation and Khilafat had sparked off considerable enthusiasm for the ideas of non-violence, temperance, and a simple life.⁸⁶ For many Nayars, involvement with the Congress meant the adoption of a purer style of life which was quite at variance with their lifestyles as country gentry. A pamphlet written in 1920 depicted the transformation wrought on a typical martial, hard-drinking, hot-tempered Nayar by the introduction of a *charkha* into his home. He gave up his favourite pastime of hunting, threw his gun into the household pond, and devoted himself to spinning meditatively.⁸⁷

In 1921, Congress activities briefly fanned out from the activities of isolated individuals when agitation for security of tenure for tenants and Khilafat activity meshed together. The outbreak of the Mappila rebellion, the attempt to set up an Islamic state in the taluka of Ernad and Walluvanad, and rumours of forced conversion of Hindus badly frightened the Nayar Congressmen. For the next decade, there was a retreat from secular political activity and an increasingly introspective Hindu style began to develop in Malabar. Unlike northern India, in Malabar there was more of an attempt to create a Hindu identity rather than the assertion of an existing one.⁸⁸ As we have seen, the caste movement of the Tiyyas saw itself as moving away from the realm of Hinduism with the endeavour to create a network of temples where a community of worshippers would be unified by their caste identity.

The Congress had always recognized the problem of untouchability out of the corner of its eye, but it was only in 1920 that untouchability came to be defined in a particular sense as a 'reproach to Hinduism'.⁸⁹ Religious leaders were requested to help in reforming Hinduism so

that it could be purged of this egregious accretion. A nationalist unity could be imagined only if the difference and inequality between castes could be tackled. If Hinduism could be purified by the abolition of untouchability and everyone could enter it as equals, then it would be possible to unify the diverse caste movements under the umbrella of the Congress. Ostensibly there was a constituency here, since the caste movements had excluded untouchables and lower castes from their programme. In a pamphlet called *Svatantrayuddham* (Freedom Struggle), a Nayar Congressman rebuked the Tiyyas for not behaving as equals with Pulayas, Panans, and Nayadis and not allowing them into Jagannatha or Sundareswara.⁹⁰

T.K. Madhavan, a close associate of Narayana Guru, carried this objective to the national realm when he introduced a resolution at the Kakinada session of the Congress in 1923 stating that temple entry was the birthright of all Hindus. If all castes were allowed to enter temples which restricted entry to upper castes, then Hinduism could be purged of inequality. Caste equality lay in the sanctuary of a temple. After the disaster of the Khilafat alliance, the Nayar leaders of the Congress needed a programme which could at the same time involve large numbers of people and subsume caste movements into a more general Hindu identity. In 1924, Kelappan Nayar convened an anti-untouchability committee within the K.P.C.C. and toured Travancore with a party of Congressmen from Malabar. It was decided that the Congress would fight for the right of Ezhavas and lower castes to use the roads around Vaikkam temple. On 30 March 1924, K.P. Kesava Memon and T.K. Madhavan, accompanied by Nayar, Pulaya, and Ezhava volunteers, attempted to walk on the roads near the temple and were arrested. The next day three more Congress leaders from Malabar were arrested; they included K. Kelappan (who by now had eschewed his caste surname). In the meanwhile, Gandhi had been following events with great interest, and had sent goodwill telegrams to the organizers. With the arrest of all the Nayar Congress leaders, George Joseph (1887–1938), a Syrian Christian, and one-time editor of *Young India*, assumed charge of the satyagraha. Gandhi immediately wrote to Joseph, specifying that the Vaikkam satyagraha was a Hindu affair and he 'should let the Hindus do the work'.⁹¹

Gandhi stressed that the satyagraha was not only a Hindu but also a local issue which was not part of the non-co-operation movement. The Vaikkam satyagraha was a 'socio-religious movement. It had

no immediate or ulterior political motive behind it. It was directed purely against an age-long, intolerable sacerdotal prejudice.⁹² Gandhi's intervention meant that the Vaikkam satyagraha petered out into an issue which was finally decided in the Legislative Council. A resolution to allow Ezhavas to use roads near the temples was defeated by one vote.⁹³ What were the consequences of the Vaikkam satyagraha for Malabar? It bolstered the spirits of a demoralized Congress which was able to recoup itself after the shock of the Mappila rebellion of 1921. Equally, it gently moved them towards the *cul de sac* of 'Hindu' politics and of seeing the problem of caste and untouchability as a purely religious issue; temple entry and caste equality meshed into a unit. Nevertheless, it was a programme with which the Congress in Malabar could attempt to bring the other castes into one consolidated movement. A pamphlet by a Nayar Congressman described the Vaikkam satyagraha as the achievement of 'Ezhava volunteers with the civilised classes as their leaders.'⁹⁴

Gandhi's definition of the issue of untouchability as one in which the Hindus had to purify themselves, provided Nayar Congressmen in the interior with their own programme. They turned to those castes dependent on their households as labourers or as ritual functionaries. A.C. Kannan Nayar (1898–1967), a Congressman and landlord, enthusiastically recorded in his diary how he had organized the wood-workers and washermen dependent on his household and tried to inculcate habits of cleanliness and temperance in them.⁹⁵ A younger generation within the Nayar households, which was drawn to the Congress, organized their literally captive audience of Cheruma and Pulaya labourers into temperance leagues. Tiyyas continued to assert their new-found sense of community and status not only in the exclusion of Pulayas and Cherumas from their temples, but also in an increasing tendency to impose sanctions on castes lower to them. These castes were caught between the pincers of Tiyya disapproval and Nayar enthusiasm for organizing them.

Gandhi and the Congress defined the problem of caste inequality in terms of an opposition between cleanliness and the lack of it, locating the whole issue not in terms of economic or social realities but a physical state. Though uncleanness as associated with the *bhangi's* profession had ritual connotations as well, since they removed human excrement, in Congress activity cleanliness became a secular metaphor for casteness. *Khadi*, conceived initially as a symbol of

Indian self-reliance, now came to assume a pivotal role in this context as the great leveller. Caste difference had been stressed earlier in the way people dressed. The advocacy of *khadi* implied that if everyone dressed alike then difference could be eliminated. The wearing of clean, white, starched *khadi* emphasised cleanliness as well as the aspiration to sameness. Once cleanliness had been introduced into the public arena as a concept, it assumed the same force as an idea that socialism was to have in the next decade. At a meeting of the Adi Keraliyar in Kalliasseri, a resolution asserted that 'cleanliness is the only thing that distinguishes the upper castes from the Harijans.'⁹⁶ Once the ostensible principle underlying difference was clarified, caste inequality was hoist with its own petard.

Given that the lower castes had been rendered clean—abstemious, bathed, and given to daily prayer—how were they to be admitted to society as equals? Many of the early Nayar Congressmen organised interdining with the castes dependent on their households.⁹⁷ However, these were localized activities and could not be reproduced on a larger scale because of the involvement of individuals in several circuits of power—that of their caste, their landlord, and their locality. One way of uniting these isolated activities could have been to utilize religious fairs and festivals, and attempt to gain entry for lower castes to temples and shrines.⁹⁸

Shrine festivals drew upon a limited community of worshippers within a well-defined geographical area. Moreover, the Nayar Congressmen were keen to dissociate themselves from the consumption of alcohol and blood sacrifices which accompanied worship at most shrines. In this they were at one with the Tiyya elites who advocated a withdrawal from the shrines as well as those Tiyyas who were escaping from the entrenchment of their caste inferiority at shrine festivals. The rhetoric of cleanliness had to be synthesized with the larger issue of caste equality. Tiyya elites had partly solved the problem by standing as a separate, and therefore equal community with their own temples. The Nayar Congressmen, working with the notion of difference inherent in caste and the idea of unity implicit in their nationalist message, were seemingly at an impasse. But all these strands—the movement away from shrines, the move towards cleanliness and its association with casteness, the possibility raised by the Vaikkam satyagraha of temple entry for all castes, and above all the narrowing of Congress horizons into a Hindu introspection—were rearranging themselves

into a pattern. The pattern was of a throng of clean, equal Hindus marching through the portals of a temple towards a nationalist unity. This was the new ideal, and the temple at Guruvayur was the Bastille to be stormed. As Kelappan was to write to Nehru towards the end of 1931, 'Guruvayur temple is the last refuge of all caste arrogance and prejudice. Once untouchability is dislodged from there it will have no quarter outside.'⁹⁹

Conclusion

An emergent elite among the Tiyyas precipitated a movement away from the shared culture centred on shrines—a negotiated community of both sustenance and worship. This involved a redefinition both of existing relations between households and labourers as well as of the meaning and content of religious festivals. Both upper-caste reformers and the broad political ideology of nationalism built upon this discourse. Both envisaged a move to a 'higher' realm of shared religious culture characterized by normative values of purity and restraint. The abandoning of one domain of shared culture (now marred by its seeming reproduction of inequality) was coeval with the aspiration towards another sphere of common culture inhabited by equals. This was a process that did not reach fruition as the *tharavadu*-shrine-labourer complex underwent redefinition, and rejuvenation, in the aftermath of the Depression. In a period of economic dislocation, food shortages, and expansion of cultivation to the poorer margins, the community of subsistence was reiterated, but with the vital difference that the *tharavadu* were calling the shots. To an extent socialist and peasant-union activity managed to mitigate some of the harshness of relations between empowered landlords and dependent labourers. They also tried to create a secular idiom of politics to tackle the question of social disparities, but this intimation of equality too remained elusive.

Notes

1. William Logan wrote of 'Nayars of ability' who wrested landholding rights and attracted the great body of cultivators to agricultural production centred on their households. He traced a process of the breakdown of communal rights over land in favour of individual 'families', beginning from the fifteenth century: *Malabar Land Tenures Report*, 1881 (Madras,

- 1882; henceforth MLTR), vol. I, p. xv. It is possible that this process gained momentum in the early nineteenth century with the expansion of land frontiers in the wake of warfare. See K.K.N. Kurup, *Pazhassi Samarangal* (Pazhassi Revolts; Trivandrum, 1980).
2. L. Moore, *Malabar Law and Custom* (2nd edn, Madras, 1900), pp. 6–8.
 3. K. Madhavan, *Payaswiniyude Teerattu* (On the Banks of the Payaswini; Trivandrum, 1987), p. 14.
 4. F. Fawcett, *The Nayars of Malabar* (Madras, 1901), p. 199; T.K.G. Panikkar, *Malabar and its Folk* (Madras, 1900), pp. 162–3.
 5. Board of Revenue (LR) Proceedings, Forest no. 110, 7 March 1888 (Kozhikode Regional Archives; henceforth KRA); Board of Revenue (LR) Proceedings, Forest no. 635, 30 November 1888 (KRA).
 6. Fawcett, *The Nayars of Malabar*, p. 199.
 7. E.K. Gough, 'Changing Kinship Usages in the Setting of Political and Economic Change among the Nayars of Malabar', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 82, 1 (1952), p. 72.
 8. Logan, *Malabar Manual*, vol. II, appendix XIII, pp. cixviii–xix, cxcviii.
 9. A. Aiyappan, *Iravas and Culture Change* (Madras, 1944); E.J. Miller, 'Village Structure in North Kerala', in M.N. Srinivas (ed.), *India's Villages* (Bombay, 1960), p. 50.
 10. *MLTR 1881*, p. xi; Fawcett, *Nayars of Malabar*, p. 311.
 11. K.R. Unnis, 'Caste in South Malabar' (PhD dissertation, M.S. University, Baroda), quoted by Joan Mencher, 'Kerala and Madras: A Comparative Study of Ecology and Social Structure', *Ethnology* V, 2 (1966).
 12. A pamphleteer of the 1920s provided a list of such names as Kanja, Nambalam, and Chathall and stated that any attempt to change a name was fraught with danger: P. Govindan, *Adidraavidarude ambala pravesanam* (Temple Entry for the Adi Dravidas; Cannanore, 1925), p. 2.
 13. E. Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras, 1909), vol. VI, p. 120.
 14. A Brahman correspondent wrote to the journal *Man* of a family in Calicut which was being harassed by evil spirits. After the scion of the Nambudiri family at Kallur professed defeat at the hands of the malevolent creatures, Parayan magicians were called in and managed to rout the forces of evil. K.V. Krishna Ayyar, 'Chathan: a Devil or a Disease', *Man* 115 (September 1928).
 15. See D.M. Menon, 'Caste, Nationalism, and Communism in Malabar, 1900–1948' (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1990), ch. 1.
 16. Revenue Dept. GO.2564, 9 December 1929 (India Office Library and Records; henceforth IOL); Revenue dept. GO.2425, 23 November 1921 (IOL). The Board of Revenue was forced to recognize that unless they could lay stress on the fact that the rights of a landlord in Malabar were

not more extensive than those of a ryotwari proprietor, the position of the government was 'hopeless'. Revenue R. Dis.6525/20, 18 September 1920 (KRA).

17. Evidence of R. Suryanarayana, Servants of India Member, Calicut, in *Royal Commission on Labour in India* (London, 1931), vol. VII, pt I, p. 308.
18. *Census of India, 1911*, vol. XII, Madras, pt I, Report, p. 27.
19. Simon Commander has convincingly argued that the jajmani mode of relations between rural patrons and dependants was not subverted by the forces of the market in nineteenth-century north India. It was in fact strengthened in the conditions of population growth and price inflation that prevailed. More recently, Chris Fuller has argued for a more holistic understanding of the economy in which market exchange as well as patronal relations should be seen as 'major features of the economic system as a whole': S. Commander, 'The Jajmani System in North India: An Examination of Its Logic and Status across Two Centuries', *Modern Asian Studies* 17, 2 (1983), pp. 307–8, and C.J. Fuller, 'Misconceiving the Grain Heap: A Critique of the Concept of the Indian Jajmani System', in M. Bloch and J.P. Parry (eds), *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 51.
20. C.A. Innes, *Malabar Gazetteer* (1908; rptd Madras, 1951), p. 249.
21. The argument is similar to that of James Scott's notion of a 'subsistence ethic'—that landowners should provide, and the state's exactions should not encroach upon, the 'minimum needs' of cultivators. Scott, however, reifies the idea as the bottom line of peasant expectations. See James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in South East Asia* (New Haven, 1976), pp. 1–10. In north Malabar, cultivators responded more flexibly, and in the face of the inability of households to provide subsistence in the 1940s, they bargained for access to land instead.
22. It is not without significance that the granaries of *tharavadus* were the centres of authority in the countryside, and it was here that Nayar landlords sat to administer justice in local cases. Testimony of Pokken Gurikkal *et al.*, *File on the Oral History of Kasergode Taluk* (in Malayalam; A.K. Gopalan Centre, Trivandrum).
23. E.J. Miller, 'Caste and Territory in Malabar', *American Anthropologist* 56 (1954). The *puja*, establishing the relations of worship between worshipper and deity, is treated as a metaphor for social and political relations in two recent works: N.B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: The Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 47–8, and D. Ludden, *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985), p. 65.
24. Burton Stein, 'Introduction', in B. Stein (ed.), *South Indian Temples: An Analytical Consideration* (Delhi, 1978), p. 3. Emphasis added.

25. I draw upon studies on 'popular culture' in Europe, particularly the perceptive and nuanced work of Roger Chartier. Chartier lays emphasis on practice—the several understandings and ways of using cultural forms or 'artefacts'—which may be characterized as much by 'defiance and defence' as compliance and conformity. See R. Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France', in S. Kaplan (ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture* (The Hague, 1985), p. 233. To a large extent, Chartier is influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's seminal *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1978).
26. In Malabar, unlike the rest of the Presidency, the *melkoyma*, or the right to superintend religious endowments, which had been exercised by kings and landlords, had not been taken over by the government. When the question of bringing Malabar under the 1817 regulation was raised in 1915, the then Collector, C.A. Innes, observed that, 'having regard to the usage of a hundred years . . . Government cannot apply these Regulations': Revenue DR D19/15, 16 February 1915 (KRA). See Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 105, 162–3; and Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, for the Madras Presidency.
27. Report of the special duty tehsildar, 15 August 1939. R. Dis. Revenue 7034/39, 23 January 1941 (KRA). Rents on temple lands were always paid in grain, and, even during the food shortage of the 1940s, rents continued to be collected in kind.
28. *MLTR 1881–2*, lix.
29. Moore, *Malabar Law and Custom*, pp. 270, 273. British officials described these *uralar* as trustees since Indian temples were comprehended in the English model of the charitable trust. See Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict*, p. 173.
30. The list includes 9 oil pressers (Vaniyans), 2 washermen (Vannan/Mannan), 2 weavers (Chaliyan), 8 shrine priests and oracles (Komaram/Velichapad), 4 astrologers (Kanisans), 2 barbers for castes below Nayars (Kabutiyan), and 2 traditional teachers (Panikkar/Vadhyar): *Settlement Register for Karivellur amsam, Chirakkal taluk* (KRA).
31. C. Kunthappa, *Samaranakal Matram* [Memoirs] (Kozhikode, 1982). Kunthappa's grandfather acted as priest at the family shrine and devoted himself to the study of the Vedanta, hunting, and breeding dogs.
32. Madhavan, *Payaswinlyude Teerattu*, p. 10, a nineteenth-century account, described the Nayars as 'debauched and irregular in their habits' and prone to eating flesh and drinking strong liquors: 'Account of the Nayanmar in the Malayalam country', manuscript book no. 13, sec. 1, quoted in Rev. Wm. Taylor, 'Fifth Report of Progress Made in the Examination of the Mackenzie MSS with an abstract account of the works examined', *Madras Journal of Literature and Science* IX, 23 (1839).

33. K.R. Pisharoti, 'Notes on Ancestor Worship Current in Kerala', *Man* 60 (July 1923), pp. 99–102; C.A. Menon, *Kali Worship in Kerala* (Madras, 1940), p. 82.
34. V.K. Raman Menon, 'Ancestor Worship among the Nayers', *Man* 25 (1910), pp. 42–3; E.K. Gough, 'Cults of the Dead among the Nayers', *Journal of American Folklore* 71 (1958), p. 467; M. Unni Nair, *My Malabar* (Bombay, 1952).
35. In Gyan Prakash's study of relations between *kamias* (bonded labour) and *maliks* (landlords) in south Bihar, he shows how landlords reproduced the caste hierarchy by subordinating the spirit cults of their bonded labour to 'Hindu beliefs'. In Malabar, as we have seen, there is a two-way process and landlords are as much under the sway of lower-caste spirits and gods. See Gyan Prakash, 'Reproducing Inequality: Spirit Cults and Labour Relations in Colonial Eastern India', *Modern Asian Studies* 20, 2 (1986), pp. 216–21.
36. Michael Moffatt argues for replication on the grounds of the permeating structure of purity and pollution inbuilt into an undifferentiated caste culture. Dirks, though more processual and willing to historicize the notion of culture, again stresses the cultural apathy or inefficacy of client castes who 'had minimal control over the articulation of their social order' and therefore were rarely guilty of 'initiating new social forms': M. Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India* (New Jersey, 1979), p. 9; Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*, p. 269.
37. Fawcett, *Nayars of Malabar*, p. 268. On occasion, secular resentments intruded on the already heightened tempers within religious festivities. On 22 May 1908, 5000 'pilgrims' surrounded the Forest Office and burnt officials records after accusing the forester of illegal trading in timber. Report of Second-class Magistrate, Kuthuparamba, 27 June 1908, and Superintendent of Police, Tellicherry, 14 June 1908, Public DR 1585/P.08 17 October 1908 (KRA).
38. A list of 'pilgrims' was provided and apart from 'the illiterate, gluttons, drunkards and rogues', there were shepherds, toddy-tappers, weavers, artisans, fishermen, oil-pressers, Pulayas and Cherumas, and Nayars of high rank: T.V. Das, *Kodungallur Bharani* (The Kodungallur Festival; Kozhikode, 1920).
39. E.J. Miller, 'An Analysis of the Hindu Caste System in its Complete Interactions with the Total Social Structure in North Kerala' (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1950), pp. 344–5.
40. Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, p. 65. Ludden follows Marriott and Inden here in arguing that 'transactions', i.e. interactions between castes, are characterized by the exchange of substances from the 'superior' to the 'inferior'. Inherent bodily substances gathered through 'right eating, right marriage and other right exchanges and actions' determine

- the status of a person. For a succinct elaboration, see McKim Marriott and R.B. Inden, 'Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems', in K. David (ed.), *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia* (The Hague, 1977). An effective critique is offered in S.A. Barnett, L. Fruzzetti, and A. Oster, 'Hierarchy Purified: Notes on Dumont and his Critics', *Journal of Asian Studies* xxxv, 4 (1976), p. 635.
41. V. Bharateeyan, *Adimakal Erigane Udamakalayi* (How the Slaves became Masters; Trivandrum, 1980), p. 79. On a visit in February 1987, I found that at Dharmadam, in Tellicherry, it is still a custom that jackfruits are not eaten before the first fruits have been offered at the shrine in Andalur.
 42. Miller argues this for all castes. However, even the poorest cultivator held land under several landlords. It would be difficult to argue that loyalty towards any one particular landlord or household would prevail: Miller, 'Village Structure in North Kerala', p. 43.
 43. Revenue R. Dis 7034/39, 23 January 1941 (KRA).
 44. *Diaries of A.C. Kannan Nayar* (in Malayalam), 28 March 1947 (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, hereafter NMML, New Delhi).
 45. See C.J. Baker, *The Politics of South India, 1917-1937* (Cambridge, 1976); and S. Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1949* (Cambridge, 1986).
 46. Joan Mencher, 'Possession, Dance and Religion in North Malabar, Kerala, India', *Collected Papers of the VIIIth Congress of Anthropology and Ethnographic Sciences* (Moscow, 1964), p. 340.
 47. H. Gundert, *Malayalam Nighandu* (Malayalam Dictionary; Kottayam, 1962), pp. 474-5.
 48. Mencher, 'Possession, Dance and Religion', p. 344. The reverent attitude of the upper castes and the feeling of power invested in the Malayan surely outlasted the space of the performance. There is a proverb in Malayalam which says of those showing false humility that they are like performing Malayans. For proverbs derived from the *teyyattam*, see C.M.S. Chanchera, *Kaliyattam* (Kottayam, 1978), pp. 290-1.
 49. M.V.V. Nambudiri, *Uttara Keralathile Thottam Pattukal* (The Thottams of North Kerala; Trichur, 1981), p. 271.
 50. M.N. Srinivas, 'A Note on Sanskritisation and Westernisation', in *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay, 1962), pp. 42-62.
 51. Innes, *Malabar Gazetteer*, p. 125.
 52. E.J. Edona, *The Economic Conditions of the Protestant Christians of Malabar with special reference to the Basel Mission Church* (Calicut, 1940).
 53. There was two colleges in Malabar at the time, Zamorin's College, Calicut (estd. 1879), and Brennen College, Tellicherry (estd. 1891), but Tiyys were denied admission till as late as 1918. A few went to Madras for a

university education and Tiyyas constituted slightly more than a tenth of the migrants from Malabar between 1906 and 1920: K.K.N. Kurup, 'Inglish Vidyabhyasavum Samuhya Purogatiyum Malabarile Tiyyaril' (English Education and Social Progress among the Tiyyas of Malabar) in *Adhunika Keralam: Charitra Gaveshana Prabandhangai* (Modern Kerala: Essays in Historical Research; Trivandrum, 1982), pp. 31–2; Susan Lawandowski, *Migration and Ethnicity in Urban India; Kerala Migrants in the City of Madras, 1870–1940* (Delhi, 1980), pp. 59–60.

54. Revenue Dept. GO.477, 22 December 1904 (IOL), p. 21. A respondent to the Malabar Tenancy Committee of 1927 stated that the rajas of Kadathunad and Chirakkal were unable to pay off the value of improvements and evict their tenants, and the latter had had to borrow Rs 75,000 to settle claims. Oral evidence of E.G. Nair, High Court vakil, Tellicherry, *Malabar Tenancy Committee Report, 1927* (Madras, 1928), vol. II, pp. 180–1.
55. Samuel Aaron, the proprietor of Aaron Mills, estimated that between 100 and 150 such 'factories' were founded by Tiyya entrepreneurs between 1914 and 1919: S. Aaron, *Jeevitha Smaranakal* (An Autobiography; Cannanore, 1974), pp. 45–8. The upwardly-spiralling prices of cotton twist had affected the handloom weavers severely, and these 'factories' took over the manufacture of cheap cloth: Revenue DR.6431/16, 27 April 1919 (KRA).
56. K.R. Achuthan, *C. Krishnan* (Kottayam, 1971), pp. 72–3. Apart from encroaching on the credit circuits of the Mappilas, Tiyya merchants, borne on the backs of the rising price of coconuts, were beginning 'to poach into the commercial preserves of the Mappilas'. By 1915, the rivalry between Tiyya and Mappila traders was so acute that Kottieth Ramunni, a prominent Tiyya lawyer in Tellicherry, was asked to form a conciliation board. DR Magisterial D. 298/M.15, 13 June 1915 (KRA).
57. *Census of India, 1921*, vol. XIII, Madras, Report, p. 193; D. Narayana Rao, *Report on the Survey of Cottage Industries in the Madras Presidency* (Madras, 1929), pp. 133–6.
58. Evidence of Rao Sahib V.K. Menon, Secretary, Malabar District Cooperative Bank, Calicut, *Royal Commission on Labour in India* (London, 1931), vol. VII, pt 1, pp. 287–8.
59. Narayana Rao, *Report on the Survey of Cottage Industries*, p. 19.
60. Address of P. Krishna Pillai at All-Malabar Workers' Conference, November 1937, *Mathrubhumi* (16 November 1937).
61. In a statement revealing the expectations of different conditions in factories, which were nearly always belied, K.P. Gopalan, an early socialist trade unionist, reminisced: 'It was shameful that a manager should subject the worker, to such beastly atrocities in the middle of a *civilised* town' (emphasis added): *Prabhatham* (5 December 1938).

62. Interspersed among these descriptions of an idle idyll are trenchant observations on the 'stratagems' of the Company which denied the worker a proper wage and on workers who wasted away amidst the omnipresent sawdust: R. Kuttan, *Irakampinipattu* (Song of the Sawmill; Palghat, 1916).
63. *Papers on Industrial Conference*, September 1908, Ootacamund, p. 59. Evidence of G.F. Baker, Henke's Tile Works, Feroke, *Report of the Indian Industrial Commission*, 1916-18, vol. III, pp. 358-60; *Report on the Working of Department of Industry in the Madras Presidency*, 1926-7, pp. 21, 34; 1932-3, p. 21; 1933-4, p. 28; 1935-6, p. 37.
64. Most of the emigrants to Ceylon were untouchables and about 10,000 Parayans had emigrated between 1900 and 1921. *Census of India, 1921*, vol. XIII, Madras, pt 1, Report, p. 49.
65. K.S. Narayanan, *Teendalvairi* (Against Untouchability; Calicut, 1927).
66. P. Govindan, *Keraliya Karmmalam Samaja Vijnapanam* (A Prospectus for the Association of Artisans; Calicut, 1911). He was very conscious of living in 'an age of progress marked by the steam engine and telegraph', and in which the English had been 'outdistanced' by the Germans, because the latter had a system of 'scientific education'.
67. *Hindu*, 29 June 1920. It is significant that untouchable movement even elsewhere in India saw the basic polarity in society as being between 'knowledge and ignorance' rather than a Dumontian opposition of 'purity and pollution'. The Ad Dharm movement in Punjab had as one of its slogans, 'Education leads us to where the truth resides'. M. Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in Twentieth-Century Punjab* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 119-20.
68. Evidence of V.V. Parameswara Ayyar, Palghat, *Report of the Unemployment Commission*, 1927, p. 251.
69. Robin Jeffrey, 'The Social Origins of a Caste Association', 1875, 1905, the Founding of the SNDP Yogam', *South Asia* 4 (1974), p. 44.
70. See M.S.A. Rao, *Social Movements and Social Transformation: A Study of Two Backward Class Movements* (Delhi, 1979). For the content of Narayana Guru's theology, see V.T. Samuel, "'One caste, one religion, and one God for man": A Study of Sree Narayana Guru (1854-1928) of Kerala, India' (PhD dissertation, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1973).
71. When subscriptions for the Sundareswara temple were being raised, Aaron Senior (who, though a Christian convert, maintained his links with the Tiyya community) donated a 'large sum' to Narayana Guru: Aaron, *Jivitha Smaranakal*, p. 56.
72. G. Lemereinier, *Religion and Ideology in Kerala* (tr. Y. Rendel; Delhi, 1984), p. 248. For early analyses on the same model, see M.S.A. Rao, *Social Change in Malabar* (Bombay, 1957), and idem, *Social Movements and Social Transformation*.
73. Washbrook understands the establishment of separate temples and

the rejection of Brahman influence in purely functional terms. He situates these trends in the particular context of the fashioning of caste identity as nothing more than a lobby in local and municipal politics. The 'non-Brahman could not lead his caste as an autonomous political community fighting against other autonomous political communities while its members were deferring to the authority of outsiders. He had to be anti-Brahman . . . if he were to make the constituency his own': D.A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 282. Since Washbrook uses only government records and no vernacular sources whatsoever, it is not surprising that he defines politics as only that which engages with the government.

74. Oral evidence of A.K. Sankara Varma Raja, Valiya Raja of Kadathunad, *MTCR*, 1927–8, II, p. 318.
75. *Mithavadi*, November 1918.
76. Bayly and Bayly write of the increasing use of sweets, sugar, and milk in ritual from the eighteenth century with the rise of stable regional governments and the increasing prosperity of urban merchants: Christopher Bayly and Susan Bayly, 'Eighteenth-Century State Forms and the Economy', in C. Dewey (ed.), *Arrested Development in India: The Historical Dimension* (New Delhi and Maryland, 1988), p. 69.
77. P. Govindan, *Adidraavidarude Ambala Pravesanam* (Temple Entry for Adi Dravidas; Calicut, 1915), p. 7. He pointed out that the new temples had *puja*, *kirtanams* (community singing), *naivedyam* (offering of clarified butter), *deeparadhana* (worship of the idols with lamps), and other wholesome forms of worship.
78. *Mithavadi*, 2 May 1921.
79. Oral evidence of E.G. Nair, High Court wakil, Tellicherry, *MTCR*, 1927–8, vol. II, p. 163.
80. This stance continued until the mid-1930s, when the combination of the impact of the Depression, the rising commercial strength of the Mappila community, and the possibility of engagement with a wider politics after the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, precipitated a crisis of sorts. The younger generation of Tiyyas moved towards the Congress with the adoption of a militant 'Hindu' identity. See Menon, 'Caste, Nationalism and Communism', ch. 5.
81. Gyan Prakash offers a pathbreaking exposition of how colonial discourse reinterpreted complex reciprocal relations between landlords (*maliks*) and labourers (*kamias*) in south Bihar within a discourse of 'exploitation' and 'unfreedom'. It is interesting to see how lower-caste movements of the twentieth century cast the debate within very much the same mould. Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1–13, 218–26.
82. Washbrook, *Emergence of Provincial Politics*, pp. 50–2.

83. *Report on the Administration of Akbari Revenue in the Madras Presidency, 1890–1900*, p. 44, Appendix E-109.
84. Petition of tappers to the Kerala Labour Union, Mithavadi, September 1918. The *menokki*, excise official, became an object of universal hatred and Nayanar's satirical short story, 'Who killed the *menokki*?' (1893) reflected the general attitude. When a *menokki* went missing, it was assumed as a matter of course that he had been killed by a tapper. After the tapper had been considerably harried, it was discovered that the *menokki*, after a heavy meal, had lain down to rest under a tree and presently died. V.K. Nayanar, 'Menokkiye Konnathu Aaranu?' *Kesari I'ayanarude Kirthikal* (The Collected Works of Kesari Nayanar; Calicut, 1987), pp. 6–13.
85. L.M. Carroll, 'The Temperance Movement in India: Politics and Social Reform', *Modern Asian Studies* 10, 3 (1976), p. 420; Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism* (Delhi, 1966), pp. 556–61.
86. K.P. Karunakara Menon, *History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala* (Trivandrum, 1972), II, p. 69.
87. C. Padmavathi Amma, *Chakramahima* (The Saga of the Charkha; Calicut, 1920).
88. Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York, 1982), pp. 193–201.
89. See E. Zelliot, 'Congress and the Untouchables, 1915–50', in R. Sisson and S. Wolpert (eds), *Congress and Indian Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase* (Berkeley, 1988).
90. C.K. Nambiar, *Svatantrayuddham* (Tellicherry, 1924).
91. Gandhi to George Joseph, 6 April 1924, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (henceforth CWMG; Ahmedabad, 1967), vol. XXIII, p. 391. Gandhi clarified that the Congress resolution at Nagpur had called upon only the 'Hindu members' to remove the curse of untouchability.
92. CWMG, vol. XXIII, pp. 441–2.
93. Jeffrey, 'Status, Class and the Growth of Radical Politics', pp. 153–2.
94. Nambiar, *Svatantrayuddham*.
95. *Diaries of A.C. Kannan Nayar*, 23 June and 7 July 1929 (NMML).
96. *Mathrubhumi*, 29 May 1934.
97. See the *Diaries of A.C. Kannan Nayar*; Sankaran, *Ente Jivitha Katha*.
98. See G. Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926–34: A Study in Imperfect Mobilisation* (Delhi, 1978), chs 2 and 3, for similar activity in U.P. and the utilization of the Kumbh Mela, for example, for Congress propaganda.
99. K. Kelappan to J. Nehru, 23 October 1931, All-India Congress Committee File G/86, 1931 (NMML).

Holy Infancy

Love and Power in a 'Low-Caste'
Sect in Bengal*

TANIKA SARKAR

Chaitanya bhakti, the predominant strand of Vaisnav devotionism in eastern India, has stimulated a very diverse range of sects since the sixteenth century when the great saint Chaitanya preached his message of love for Krishna. Many of these sects appear to be mutually contradictory: a gulf seemingly separates the mainstream orders founded by Chaitanya's immediate disciples from the deviant, esoteric folk cults that claimed a loose affiliation to Gaudiya theories devoted to Chaitanya.¹

Here I look at a curious and obscure little local sect in the Jessore-Khulna region in eastern Bengal,² a sect that does not quite fit within either side of the binary divide.³ It was formed in the late eighteenth century by Balakdas, a 'low-caste' shudra savant from a peasant family. Most unusually, he was apprenticed to a brahman guru, Nakul Brahmachari, in his childhood. Village brahmans, impressed with certain early signs of extraordinary power, sponsored his religious training under Nakul. Still more unusually, the guru initiated him and taught him Sanskrit and Bengali religious texts, even though, strictly speaking, the shudra was not entitled to Sanskrit, the language of the gods. Nakul,

*This is an unpublished essay based on Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagio-graphy: The Balakdashis of Early Modern Bengal', in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009, pp. 69–120.

therefore, combined the vital roles of *shikshaguru* who teaches, and *dikshaguru* who initiates. More important for Balak's future, Nakul left him a precious idol of the child Krishna or Balgopal, miraculously discovered and coming alive for his two devotees.⁴ It is interesting that the sixteenth-century lawgiver Raghunandan, a near contemporary of Chaitanya, had recommended the worship of the infant Gopal as especially appropriate for shudras.⁵

The design of Balakadas' hagiography alerts us to several dimensions in Bengali devotionism that have escaped the attention of social historians of early modern Hinduism.⁶ If we look at the founding myths of local sects, or at tales about domestic shrines, we immediately become aware of the immense significance of the idol around whom devotion is organized.⁷ Almost invariably, in each case, there is the romance of a sudden and unexpected discovery by the first worshipper, an astonishing revelation of miraculous signs. It is a drama of a deliberate and playful self-disclosure by the deity to the elect, both a fragment of the god and a mark of his special grace to the recipient. In the twentieth-century hagiography about Balakdas there are two separate narratives about the discovery of the idol: one collected from popular lore, the other a more 'rational' non-miraculous one where Balakdas picked the idol from the streets of a pilgrimage town. The latter version was favoured by the educated, upper-caste, middle-class hagiographer, but we will later focus on the 'non-rational' miracle tale favoured by Balak's low-caste worshippers and contemporaries.

Let me cite another example from a different sect: a founding tale that is fairly typical of the discovery myths. The *lingam* of Shiva that is worshipped by millions at the pilgrimage temple of Tarakeshwar in south-west Bengal was supposedly discovered by young cowherds playing in the forest who were struck by the fact that a cow disappeared for some time every day; trailing it, they came upon a half sunk *lingam* over which the cow was pouring forth a profuse and spontaneous stream of milk.⁸

Once discovered, the idol is invested with a special name and an individuated biography, often revealed by the deity in a dream. The human form and gesture in which the idol form is displayed compels a particular religious emotion and style of worship: in the case of Vaisnavs, erotic contemplation if the deity is in the company of his beloved, or paternal affection if he is shown as a child. The

innumerable particularities and unique history that each individual idol or *vigraha* possesses—whether housed in domestic shrines or in temples—is crucial for mobilizing a specific devotional response, mood, and aesthetic stance, especially important to Vaisnav bhakti. Visual representations of the child Krishna sometimes show him as a tiny, wayward, dancing figure, whose smallness and abandon invite delighted affection. That is how, for instance, he is depicted in some miniatures that illustrate the *Puranas*: he is the smallest figure in the pictures, far smaller than the demons that he is shown to be killing, even as he dances.⁹

Balakdas chose to worship the infant Krishna. He developed a relationship of paternal love towards the holy child, a very pervasive religious sentiment, common to many Vaisnav as well as non-Vaisnav religious imaginations in Bengal. Apart from verses recalling Krishna's childhood miracles and play, Chaitanya's own childhood has occupied a large and significant place in his hagiographies.¹⁰ The saint's early life had an autonomous value as well as a lexical importance: it proved his own early greatness and was a reminder of the celestial powers of the child Krishna.¹¹ Some of his hagiographers' childhood tales were also written down and commemorated.¹²

Other sects, too, have sometimes adored their deities as a child. Shiva had eminently childlike qualities in his mythological representations. Shakta devotees—dedicated to the Great Goddess, Shiva's consort—celebrate her divine childhood in memorable songs. A special genre of devotional songs, *agamani*, written by Ramprasad, Bharatchandra, and Kamalakanta among many others, became extremely popular from the eighteenth century.¹³ They are composed as the words of her mother, acutely missing her married daughter, and anticipating her three-day annual visits to the natal home with joy and dread: the visits being such a comfort and yet so very brief.¹⁴ The genre entered the domain of folk performances from the nineteenth century as Ram Basu and Dasarathi Ray, popular *kabiwalas*, or poets who composed impromptu verses in mutual competition in public performances, often sang about the much missed divine child.¹⁵ Unlike the emotions aroused by the child Krishna, devotion towards this feminine divinity is steeped in sorrow and the certainty of loss. The joy of the brief reunion of mother and daughter is frenetic, made anxious by the relentless passage of time.

At the same time, major or monumental works of Bengali religious iconography—paintings, sculpture, or large clay idols worshipped annually and then immersed in a river—did not represent the parent–child relationship in significant ways.¹⁶ Instead, miniature idols, more as everyday and household religious objects, embodied the child god. These would be most often preserved at domestic shrines at home rather than worshipped as centrepieces in temples. Uma, the Great Goddess as a young girl, has no icon, nor is she worshipped as an autonomous being, a stand-alone deity. She is remembered only in songs and verses as a transient part of the life of the Great Goddess.¹⁷ Balakdas' Gopal was unusually fortunate to have an entire temple dedicated to him but the temple itself was a minor, local landmark. It seems, then, that the holy child was commemorated in small icons, worshipped in intimate but non-public spaces.

In literary creations, too, *balyaleela*, or the divine sport of the holy infant, was never a theme that occupied an entire text, the way Krishna's erotic play often would. It would always be an important prelude, a part of a text. The child was, therefore, an object of devotion but not the most prominent aspect of canonical iconography or sacred literature. Gaudiya Vaisnavism admitted *vatsalya* or parental love as a legitimate *rasa*, an emotion with which to approach the god, but it did not privilege it particularly. The simultaneous importance and marginality of the figure of the child in the Bengali religious imagination is a striking ambivalence.¹⁸ Although Bengali Vaisnavism has generated a particularly rich crop of scholarship around its many aspects, the discursive significance of this ambivalence has been rather neglected.

Balakdas was a low-caste savant, though one much respected by brahmans. So were most members of his sect. Low-caste devotion is usually studied on one of three distinct registers: as willing submission to and imitation of upper-caste forms, though from a humble distance, something which Michael Moffat has described.¹⁹ Or as dissidence and rebellion against upper-caste forms, which Sekhar Bandyopadhyay studied for the Matua sect in late-nineteenth-century Bengal.²⁰ Or, as Bernard S. Cohn showed in his study of the Shivanarayani sect in UP, such devotion can exist within a new sect, founded and led by upper castes, which cleared a space, albeit on unequal terms, for low-caste Chamars and Dusadhs.²¹ Balakdashis constituted a category separable

from all these. Balakdas did not rebel, nor did he merely copy. He founded his own sect and was its indisputable leader, improvising a distinctive style all his own. Yet there was no rebellion in him, only conformism towards caste. I take up this case as a departure, an unexplored form of subaltern devotionism within the given caste order. We need to reflect on the precise ways in which paternalism shaped and drove this form.

We must be careful, however, not to bifurcate the question of caste in Vaisnav bhakti into a simple high- and low-caste division. For Balakdas' caste identity, the category of shudra would mean little. The identity was at once more concrete and more mobile, inflected and reformulated by class. He and his followers were men from aspiring and solvent peasant-artisan-small-trader communities, many of whom would later claim an improved ritual status. We need to read his religion and the place of childhood within it while keeping these distinctions in mind.

II

When he struck out on his own path, Balakdas offered a simplified version of Gaudiya Vaisnavism's *achintyabhedabhed tattwa* or the theory of incomprehensible dualism/non-dualism: the concept that the human and the divine soul are, at once, one and different: just as Radha, as Krishna's power of bliss and joy, is both an internal aspect of the god and is, yet, a different being, so as to enable a relationship of mutual pleasure. Many Bengali Vaisnavs claim that the theory constitutes a separate fifth order, apart from the four main schools of Vaisnav bhakti. Many others suggest, however, that it is a subset of the school of *vishishtadvaitavad* or distinctive non-separation.²²

Gaudiya Vaisnavs place the divine duo Radha and Krishna in a state of holy adultery or *parakiya*.²³ At the Jaipur court in 1718, and again at the Muslim nawab's court at Murshidabad in 1720, they successfully debated on behalf of *parakiyatattwa* with their opponents who subscribed to the *swakiya* theory of licit relationships and who preferred to commemorate the conjugal alliances of Krishna.²⁴

Instead of the six-stage ladder of Gaudiya bhakti, Balak taught a three-tier gradation,²⁵ wherein the devotee proceeds from worship (the state of *bahyadasha* or alterity in relation to the deity) to direct

observation of divine sport (*ardha bahyadasha* or half merger with the divine being) to full merger with divinity (*antardasha* or complete internalization). He modestly claimed that he himself inhabited merely the second stage. He acknowledged that even though Gaudiya Vaisnavism rightly privileged the erotic *leela* or divine sport of Krishna as the highest *madhura rasa*, denoting sweetness and loveliness, he himself preferred the path of *dasya* or servitude.²⁶ In practice, however, he followed *vatsalya*, approaching the god with parental love: an emotional stance that Gaudiya Vaisnavism recognizes but only as a lesser preference among the several approaches to the divine.

In keeping a certain respectful distance from the highest tenets of Vaisnav bhakti, Balakdas behaved like a good and faithful shudra. At the same time, quite obviously practising *vatsalya*, he was believed to possess a direct and lived relationship with the god: one where he did not merely serve the god, as he would in the case of *dasya*, but where he also protected and nurtured him as his guardian, his father. Local brahmans endorsed that claim. It seems interesting that he designated himself as an adherent of the path of servitude when he so clearly approached Gopal with parental love, a competence that was, in fact, granted to him, as shudra, even by Raghunandan, the most orthodox of Bengal lawgivers. The gap between official self-designation and actual practice actually indicates a very spectacular humility prescribed by the Vaisnav code of conduct for all devotees, as well as by the felt and prescribed lowliness of shudradom. The humility undoubtedly reconciled local brahmans to his role as the father figure to the idol. I think that this complex resource of entwined modesty and self-privileging approximates certain elements within Chaitanya bhakti and its multi-caste congregation.

His first followers were low-caste traders who passed along the mighty rivers Bhairab and Madhumati that connected east Bengal marts with distant trade centres in Bengal, and who prayed to his Gopal for safe passage and for protection from the many diseases, floods, hurricanes, river dacoits, and wild animals that regularly ravaged the area.²⁷ Balak himself came from a peasant shudra family, then called Chasha Kaivartas, later petitioning to be renamed Mahishyas in the 1901 colonial census.²⁸ A great deal of land reclamation had gone on in the region from the fifteenth century, first under the auspices of agriculturist Sufi pirs, then by Mughals, and, finally under early

colonial initiatives.²⁹ This was followed by a growing market for local crops as Calcutta began to throw out its tentacles into distant places of production and as European trade expanded from the seventeenth century, stimulating local agriculture and manufacture. Local peasants and traders thus, by the eighteenth century, had come to acquire a measure of economic solvency.³⁰ Chasha Kaivartas had recently severed their links with the degraded ancestral caste of fishermen or Jalia Kaivartas, whose water and ritual occasions were avoided by clean brahmans. They were now called *satchasha* or clean agriculturists. From the late nineteenth century, they would claim the status of even cleaner or intermediate shudras whose water and gifts were acceptable to good brahmans who would, moreover, preside over their ritual ceremonies without fear of disrepute.³¹ I have argued elsewhere that such bids for upward mobility found support among the less pure or *patit* brahmans who did offer their ritual services to lower shudras; they now tried to improve their own ritual ranking within the brahman category by claiming that their shudra clients should be counted among the cleaner ranks. This kind of a symbiotic tie between brahman and shudra patrons and clients has not been adequately comprehended as yet.³²

It has long been established that Bengali castes underwent a crucial modification from late medieval and early modern times. In a Bengal ruled then for centuries by various Muslim rulers and witnessing large-scale migrations of low castes into Islam, Raghunandan—the great authority of the *dayabhaga* school of Hindu law—prescribed in the sixteenth century that, apart from brahmans, there were no other high castes left in Bengal. All others were shudras whom he minutely classified into thirty-six subdivisions, hierarchically arranged and placed according to the kinds of offerings each was entitled to donate to brahmans.³³ I would suggest that this inaugurated a long era, continuing into late colonial times, of immense competition, reclassification, and reordering of local hierarchies among various shudra *jatis*, their endless self-splittings and fraction-formings. Brahmans remained interested referees in these complicated manoeuvres and the status ranking of some of their own lesser categories would depend on the reclassified rank of their shudra patrons. If some very low castes could be promoted to a somewhat cleaner rank, then many more categories of brahmans could become their priests without losing ritual status.

It was the internecine configurations among shudras that emerged as the constitutive site for caste formation, not a brahman–non-brahman or high- and low-caste binary divide. Even those *jatis* which would later claim the *bhadralok* mantle of social respectability alongside brahmans—*kayasthas* and *baidyas*—were classified as shudras by many orthodox brahmans well into the twentieth century.³⁴

So, upward mobility had already begun, but the process was still at an early stage. *Satchasha* or the shudra peasant category from which Balakdas came was still a part of the larger Kaivarta appellation and good brahmans avoided them. In Balak's sect—blessed and respected by brahman—peasant shudras found a measure of self-respect and self-esteem, a repertoire of 'clean', respectable habits and beliefs that aided their aspirations. The fact that Balak was respected by local brahmans and that he possessed a living god would further consolidate their aspirations for status.

Balak's followers were petty traders who had done well out of the newly expanding trade networks. They belonged to both clean and unclean shudra castes, men with a small stock of capital and with growing aspirations towards social respectability and improved ritual ranking. At the same time, their solvency was fragile: a single occasion of natural calamity or river piracy, all too frequent in the eighteenth-century Jessore-Khulna region, could wipe out their savings. They were still despised by the well-entrenched brahmanical orthodoxy in the region. They, too, experienced a mix of vulnerability and ambition. In Balak's sect, they found a man of their own rank who was, nonetheless, respected and trusted by brahmans and who prescribed doctrines and practices like bhakti and vegetarianism that approximated a recognizably superior religious form. The sect was a bridge between low castes becoming respectable, and Gaudiya Vaisnav sectarianism characterized by brahmanical leadership. The personal connections between Balakdas and brahmans enabled this process.

The history of Balak's sect introduces us to the process of upward mobility through a sort of a symbiotic relationship between the brahman and the shudra. It also clarifies a process of community-making among Gaudiya Vaisnavs where caste was rearticulated, through ardent bhakti, on a new register into what Victor Turner calls *communitas*, moments of intimate bonding across social distances through shared congregational ecstatic worship, and a shared local tradition of miracle tales and wondrous idols. Balak's sect was definitely an autonomous

entity. But, even as such, it was firmly encased within the Gaudiya Vaisnav framework of beliefs.

The sect had to find its feet among and against many well-established rivals. Khulna-Jessore was a region dominated upto the late eighteenth century by Muslim landed power and Sufi cultural centres. It was, at the same time, also a site of brahmanical orthodoxy, rivals to Gaudiya Vaisnavs, as well as numerous folk cults and esoteric popular practices. To some extent, Balakdashi myths had to shape themselves around the folk traditions: they had to promise protection to afflicted and helpless people. Whereas Gaudiya Vaisnavism usually promises bliss and salvation to *bhakts* rather than material rewards, Gopal promised safe passage to mercantile boats and cures from epidemics and fevers.

The new forms of congregational intimacy that the sect developed in competition with others both recall and reorient Chaitanya's endeavours in fifteenth–sixteenth-century Nabadwip. Chaitanya had to contend against successful Islamic proselytization, as also against the orthodox Navyanyaya and neo-Smarta schools entrenched at Nabadwip, brahmanical orthodoxy being often in alliance with the Muslim qazi against Chaitanya. He kept his distance from tantric ritual as well, and from the widespread popular worship of folk deities.³⁵

In Chaitanya's time, there were, I think, three available modes of redefining the religious community in the face of the challenge of Islamic proselytization, especially successful among the low castes and the poor. One was the path of severe upper-caste ritualism, an extreme form of re-stratification of upper castes on the basis of purity taboos, and the reinforcement of brahmanical disciplinary norms: all this Chaitanya's contemporary, the neo-Smarta Raghunandan, represented. The other was the more integrative tradition of the Mangal Kavyas or Bengali sacred verse narratives, written by brahman poets, that inserted low-caste deities into an upper-caste pantheon. Chaitanya bhakti cleared a third space, reinstalling a deity from brahmanical Sanskrit texts into popular and folk worship but opening the sect up, on equal and shared terms, to all castes. And, dangerously, this inverted social spaces by saying that the arrogant brahman scholar is spurned by Krishna, who provides salvation to the unlearned shudra and the untouchable: hearts overflowing with love and humility are more hospitable to Krishna's presence than the arid and stony hearts of pandits.

The egalitarianism worked with interesting openings and closures. Chaitanya converted freely from among the lowly, but, at the same time, he did not try to synthesize cross-caste belief patterns and took nothing from folk cultic traditions. He himself flouted purity-pollution taboos and famously embraced the untouchable Chandal. At the same time, Gaudiya Vaisnavs allowed only non-householder ascetics to initiate the shudra, thus avoiding too close a social intimacy among high- and low-caste households. Chaitanya himself preferred boundless adoration to the path of sacred knowledge. But he asked his brahman disciples to compose a devotional canon in Sanskrit, to develop a ritual calendar, and to formulate sectarian rules, thus combining both charisma and its routinization in his own person.³⁶

Chaitanya bhakti had initially encouraged some anarchic social impulses.³⁷ This was especially true of Chaitanya's early disciple Nityananda, to whose order Balak's guru Nakul belonged.³⁸ But over the years there was a return to established social hierarchies, even if it was tempered frequently by liminal moments of congregational feasts, musical processions and collective chanting—*communitas* interrupting and also rejuvenating social difference.³⁹

The entangled stories of caste, sect, and community-makings made for important and contradictory social movements. The complexities could be mediated very significantly by tropes of holy infancy. It was Gaudiya Vaisnavism which incorporated *vatsalya* or paternal love as a separate aesthetic order of *rasa* in Vaisnav bhakti. It was not, however, a particularly well-regarded form among them. Through a focus on the Balakdashī sect, I argue that the trope of holy childhood was especially appropriate for a subaltern, conformist sect that struggled to compose its distinctive devotional imagination. The childhood of the god was visualized as a place that was scored over by a sense of divine vulnerability as well as with images of divine power and glory, registering both subalternity and hopes for a transcendence among devotees and admirers who included learned brahmans as well as peasants marked by a plebeian quietist piety.

III

Let us turn briefly to the different orders of childhood which are relevant for us: the divine and the saintly, the latter differentiated

between upper- and low-caste saints. Bengali medieval devotional lyrics celebrate the child Krishna as both 'every child' and a fully divine figure, since Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu, the preserver of Creation. There are elements of power as well as vulnerability in his earthly biography. Both aspects needed to be combined as well as split to make *vatsalya* devotionism work.

Krishna's life began in prison, and though of royal lineage he was fostered by lowly cowherds. The tale of early loss, however, is overwritten by images of profuse care and love that his foster parents, especially his mother Yashoda, showered over him. Vaisnav *bhakts*, male and female, aspiring to approach the god with *vatsalya*, identify with her. Krishna's *balyaleela*—the sport of his infancy—had all the earthly miraculousness of every human child: bewitching smiles and a tender beauty, naughtiness and greed, an endless capacity for demanding and giving love. But the holy child was indubitably more than a human baby. He lifted the Govardhan hills, punished a wicked demoness, slept with a snake. Eventually, he left Vrindavan to become king in Mathura, plunging his mother into eternal grief. Narratives of his enchanting childhood finish on a note of deep sorrow. If power and glory befitted the god, its human costs are also displayed by the sacred lore. For the early life in Vrindaban possesses a poignant sweetness absent from the chronicles of mature majesty. It helps to cement devotion as an immediate and vivid response based on the personal experience of the devotee. Interestingly, Bengali accounts of *balyaleela* stress the relatively modest plenitude of Vrindavan householders where Krishna grew up. The western Indian Ballabhacharya sect, which also worships Krishna as a child, prefers to cast him as the royal child framed in splendour.⁴⁰

Perhaps in imitation of Krishna narratives, Chaitanya's biographies, in Sanskrit and in Bengali, create his own *balyaleela* as a site replete with signs of divinity.⁴¹ Bengali Vaisnavs in the seventeenth century arrived at a compromise with Chaitanya's Vrindaban-based disciples, the learned brahman Goswamis, whereby the saint was now elevated as a reincarnation of Krishna. But, paradoxically, they also underline signs of devotion, irrelevant for the divine but supremely important for the saint. They too weave together the universal miraculousness of all mortal children along with Chaitanya's miraculous exceptionality which signified, at the very least, a semi-divinity. Strangely, only

Brindaban Das, a young contemporary of Chaitanya and his first Bengali biographer, describes Chaitanya's household as poverty stricken: a family which at times even had to go without the daily meal. All others, in sharp contrast, describe the child being treated like a prince. Everything about him was superlative, especially his breathtaking beauty, which made brahmans conclude that he was an incarnation of Narayana himself. Music sounded wherever he walked, he was immensely precocious, crawling away from home when a month old.⁴² Most prodigious was his early naughtiness, his unruly brilliance. He especially delighted in breaking caste and purity-pollution taboos, eating unclean leftover food, and snatching away the special food which a pure brahman was about to consume. Hagiographies mentioned his deviance only to immediately transfigure it as portents of holiness. The offended brahman glimpsed the four-armed Vishnu just beyond the child, and the mother could see the whole universe in the baby's tiny yawn. The flouting of caste by the future saint anticipated his own later overturnings of hierarchy. At the same time, the implications of caste reversal were contained and refigured as a licence that holy figures, as extra social beings, ought to possess. The nineteenth-century Shakta saint Ramakrishna Paramhansa was such an unruly child, disobedient and especially careless about prescribed norms.⁴³

Intimations of sainthood and holiness were read into every childhood act of Chaitanya, perhaps more so than in Krishna narratives since Krishna is recognized easily and indubitably as god on earth. Hagiographies of Chaitanya engaged in a more elaborate exercise. They recounted in thicker detail the elements of a human childhood. At the same time, the narration of childhood is loaded with subtler subtexts, clues to the divine in the human. Chaitanya loved to innovate and lead in team games, especially water sports and ball games. In fact, his biographies tell us a lot about boys' games at the time of their composition. The favourite sport was to pollute orthodox brahmans when they worshipped or meditated close to the river at Nabadwip—an anticipation of Chaitanya bhakti's imminent rivalry with Naiyayik and Smarta pandits and the savant's disregard for conventional social injunctions. He loved to play-act with his friends. But, surreptitiously, the play-acting, at its peak, moved into an ecstatic chanting of Krishna's name which sent bystanders off into

trances and made the child himself fall unconscious with emotional excitement—chronicle of a sainthood foretold. Like Krishna, he fills his mother with bliss and joy, only to leave her forever. If his naughty brilliance recalls the child Krishna, there is also an ingrained difference. It also shows amazing signs of devotion, whereas Krishna's miracles pointed at his divinity, he being above devotion: the difference between the god and the saint.⁴⁴

IV

Let us come now to the childhood of this low-caste guru. Balakdas was a child who was much loved by all, especially by his mother and aunt. A certain measure of female worship seems a constant in all three holy lives. Moreover, Krishna, Chaitanya, and Balak left behind them heartbroken women, hopelessly yearning. Divinity, to blossom fully, requires the imprint of the woman's pain which the god or the saint needs to disregard. Balak's mother and aunt died in his absence as he apprenticed himself to his guru and went on a long pilgrimage with him. It was the affection of local brahmans that, however, mattered most. Balak was specially privileged to go beyond the popular devotional resources that Gaudiya Vaisnavism provided for plebeian devotees to gain access to the entire sacred canon, even the Sanskrit texts, from which shudras were normally barred. It was his childhood activities that brought about this transformation.

He was from an early age a serious and pious child, obedient with family elders and social superiors. Like Chaitanya, he fell into trances when Krishna's name was chanted and would talk to unseen presences, including someone he called Madhusudan *dada* (elder brother Madhusudan). At first mystified, village brahmans soon remembered that Madhusudan was another name for Krishna, and knew then that the child probably could see and talk to him. They took him to Nakul for sacred learning. It was, therefore, a life entirely transfigured by brahmanical intervention. He left his family, kin, and caste group early and never came back—a tale of upward mobility, in its own way.

The hagiography talks much about his worship of his guru, reminding us that though the disciple serves the guru, he is also the guru's beloved and that the relationship lasts through all births. In its combination of servitude and love, hierarchy and intimacy, the

guru–shishya relationship recalls the tenets of Hindu conjugality, the *shishya* corresponding to the wife. Common to all gurus and disciples, the intimate hierarchy is especially laden with meanings in Balak's case since it replays the larger caste encounters within Gaudiya Vaisnav congregations. Though Nakul belonged to Nityananda's sect, which made relatively light of caste distinctions, Balak himself took a different path. He preached absolute obedience to brahmans and the absolute inferiority of shudras, combining thus *raganuga* or the emotional approach in bhakti with *vaidhi* or the path of social injunctions. It is significant that brahmans defied caste injunctions by giving the shudra access to the full canon. The shudra, however, preached conformity to caste.⁴⁵

Different castes are allotted a graded access to religious life on the principles of *adhikarbheda*, the hierarchized access to sacred truth. A suggestive contrast can, therefore, be drawn between this shudra boy's proof of bhakti and the childhood feats of the young Chaitanya. Gaudiya Vaisnavism, despite its distrust of the intellect, chose to invest young Chaitanya with generous amounts of extraordinary intelligence, whereas for the shudra Balakdas the first intimations of grace are relegated to the realm of the ecstatic and the mystical.

The young Chaitanya, moreover, was full of rebellious brilliance; he violated pollution taboos, defied his elders, was combative and disrespectful of authority. He mocked the scholarship of Nabadwip pandits and defeated them in disputations over abstruse matters. Balak, on the other hand, was the good shudra child, devout, obedient, pious, and submissive. The different models of holy childhood, of the appropriate signs of religious beginning, would thus seem to allow a greater latitude to the upper-caste child. He alone could play at the boundaries of the norms, to transcend them as a mark of his autonomy. The shudra savant, on the other hand, established a capacity for religious leadership by his demonstrated submission to his social superiors.

Let me quickly recapitulate the distinctions among different models of holy childhood. The child Krishna is the Lord himself from early infancy, deferring to none and having no need of expressing devoutness. Chaitanya is both a *bhakt* and a demi-god, an incarnation. His early miraculous feats express elements of divinity as well as bhakti. Balak does not possess divine aspects. His extra mundane achievements

express his nearness to god. He is the great *bhakt*. It is interesting that tales of his late-life miracles highlight his commitment to the discipline of caste. He could feed unscheduled brahman guests royally as food would always suddenly arrive from unknown quarters to help him out. Some sceptical boys were miraculously visited by strange afflictions when they fed an unsuspecting Balak with ritually unclean, non-vegetarian food. His miracles thus were lessons in social conformism. While Balak could not ritually initiate brahmans, Gopal, as sacred idol, was worshipped by all castes. At the same time, because Balak was the idol's custodian, his lived relationship with a living god made him greater than brahmans, proof that God favoured him above all others. It was through such looped paradoxes that Gaudiya Vaisnav proselytization worked out its potential for a limited yet real inclusiveness and community formation.

Krishna as god incarnate, the upper-caste founder of a great movement, and a local low-caste savant—for all narratives that deal with these three figures, childhood is an important place for two reasons. First, for inspiring love in devotees, as the child summons affection more sumptuously than any other kind of figure. Second, in a very different way, to transform sheer love into awe as childhood feats invariably denote extraordinary futures. In significant ways, too, god, great leader, and subaltern saint both share qualities and do not. In a sense, the markers that separate Krishna from Chaitanya are repeated in the signs that differentiate between Chaitanya and Balakdas. Bhakti required a submergence of the socially marked self as well as its recuperation. Childhood is important as a universal state but is deployed to designate social particularities.

V

But what of Balak's Gopal, the child god who is nurtured by a shudra father? One night, Nakul had a strange dream. He heard Gopal crying out to him to rescue him from the river. At dawn he went to the riverside and found some perplexed fishermen whose fishing net seemed to be stuck in the riverbed. As soon as Nakul touched it, the net lifted and out leapt a little golden idol of Balgopal, in the typical crawling posture, one arm raised, and a candy clutched in its tiny fist. Incidentally, this particular Gopal, unlike his familiar dark forms,

is always all gold, absorbing, perhaps, the quality of great fairness that had marked Chaitanya-Gouranga. When Balak later chose his moment of death, he evaporated in a haze of gold, indicating his full merger with the golden child. Anyway, Gopal went straight into Nakul's arms and went home with him. After Nakul left for his final pilgrimage, Balak took care of Gopal though he was desperately poor and trying hard to complete his own mystic quest or *sadhana*. Gopal, a naughty and demanding child, disrupted it all the time, demanding food, chats, cuddles, and a proper home.

One night, the heavens opened up, blowing away the roof of their hut. As the torrential rains poured down, the drenched child burrowed into his father's bosom, shivering and whispering 'Father, I am so cold.' This broke Balak's heart. He left his own religious quest and went around looking for material advancement. He found it among traders who had heard of the holy child. They built a fine temple which locals named Gopalbari or the house of Gopal; the child, after all, had wanted a proper house. Later, an ashram and a booming annual festival were added to his properties.⁴⁶

The demanding divine child, asking for food, shelter, home, recurs in other tales of *vatsalya*, both Vaisnav and non-Vaisnav. One of the female devotees of Ramakrishna possessed an idol of Gopal who came alive for her and fed from her hands. She came to be known as the Mother of Gopal, Gopaler Ma.⁴⁷ An associate of Chaitanya, Gobinda Ghosh, similarly, came into the possession of a piece of wood in the river and Chaitanya asked him to carve a Gopal out of it. The child lived for him and he devoted all his time to him, till he got married and had a son himself. Then the two loves of his life began to clash: he could not make out clearly which was the human child and which the divine. Irritated by his absorption in his son, a jealous Krishna caused the death of the son and, enraged, Govinda would no longer worship the real god. Krishna then promised to perform all the funerary rites for him after his death, and take the place of his son. Having promised, he asked impatiently to be fed: he had not been served so long, he was hungry.⁴⁸

Interestingly, Gobinda Ghosh was believed in his lifetime by many contemporaries to be a Sadgop, a relatively high-ranking shudra. In the early nineteenth century the modern upper-caste hagiographer, however, firmly claims for him the superior *kayastha* rank, denying

the lowlier Sadgop identity. Writing around the same time, when census operations had made the niceties of *jati* an absorbing and contentious topic, the upper-caste hagiographer of Balakdas, on the other hand, allows him to represent good and clean shudras, allowed to give water to brahmans.

There are some interesting inversions in Balak's hagiography. The human is the saviour twice in Balak's tale, while it is the divine who is saved. Visualizing the god as a child, then, enables an amazing access to activism and initiative to the human devotee, even some measure of power and control over the divine: a switching around of human and divine functions as the god is supposedly the universal nurturer and protector. Worship of the child god, then, is a sort of a theatre of devotion where the human making of the divine is implicitly enacted. Nakul and Balak are both father and mother to Gopal. Each would rescue the child and protect him like a father and then nurture him like a mother. In Balak's case, his earlier helplessness when Gopal demands material goods closely resembles the helplessness of the homebound mother. The god, on the other hand, is always the pathetic child, the eternally dependent subaltern figure. He solicits human intervention. It is by emphasizing his absolute vulnerability that he causes things to happen. The redistribution of conventional human and divine properties is quite remarkable, enabled by the child motif, by *vatsalya*.

The climatic point in the tale and also the moment of narrative departure, is the night of the storm. From a tale of domestic warmth and maternal love, it now shifts to the register of male enterprise. The night of the storm condenses an extremity of pain in an image of poverty and love, locked in helpless embrace, expressing what Marx had said about religion in general, 'the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of a heartless world.'⁴⁹ For what can be the most excruciating experience of poverty but that of the loving parent who has to watch his child suffer? If a subaltern religious imagery needs to weave social experiences of the deepest pain into itself to connect with the lived world of the devotee, there can be no image of greater power and conviction. The contrast between the resplendent royal child of Ballabhacharya maharajas and the naked child of Balakdas is a contrast between opposed devotional imaginaries generated by extremely divergent social experiences.

This especial power of childhood tales to create an affective subalternity is recapitulated in Shakta *agamani* songs as well. The Great Goddess is transformed into a wonderful little child, her pranks and her childlike grace inspiring tidal waves of love in her mother: 'Who says the autumn moon is comparable with her face? The moon lies shattered among the nails of her feet.' But she goes away, leaving the mother in aching pain and she, too, no doubt, is doomed to suffer the absence of her childhood home for long months. She returns for three days a year and the joy of reunion is shot through with the terror of certain loss. The mother pleads with the last night of her stay: 'Do not ever leave, O night of Navami.'⁵⁰

Among Bengali Hindus, child marriage was pervasive, 8 being the ideal age to gift the daughter away. By the time they reached their mid or late twenties, therefore, most women would be simultaneously married daughters, missing their mothers, as well as mothers missing their married daughters. The songs spoke to both. The woman's vulnerability was given its most affective, intense, and poetic expression in images of her childhood. Childhood becomes a site of all that is most wondrous in this world and all that is most unjust.

At the same time, Gopal's demands bear rich fruit. In a curious way, the myth is a tale of upward mobility of both deity and devotee. Gopal climbs out of the river, out of the clutches of fishermen, into the arms of a learned brahman. He is then left to the shudra. The shudra, however, is a holy figure with mystical powers and sacred knowledge. Gopal is first caught in the net of fishermen—the original Jalia Kaivartas—from whose ranks Balak's own subcaste of Chasha Kaivartas had recently separated.

VI

Why are childhood and *vatsalya* so immensely important for Gaudiya Vaisnavs, with their looped needs of caste observance and caste transcendence? Let me conclude somewhat schematically. The child, in Hindu society, is the only being unaware of social norms and discipline; he has not yet been socialized into caste. In his ordinary movements he must touch, eat, and do what is forbidden, polluted. He alone, therefore, can belong to all, appropriated by all, gather all equally under his reign. He is the living transgression, the liminal

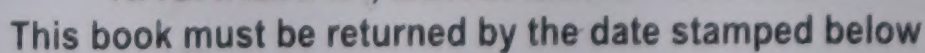
place. At the same time, childhood is the unruly place that will eventually be left behind. It is also the place where socialization into class, caste, and gender, into norms of social differentiation, are initiated. We find, therefore, important divergences in expressive modes that narrate different forms of holy childhood: of the deity of all Vaisnavs, the brahman saint's, the low-caste guru's, and of a Gopal who, in this case, is the son of a shudra father. Through a delicate and subtle mobilization of these plural possibilities, the *vatsalya* of Gaudiya Vaisnavism manages the necessary transcendence-cum-recuperation of social difference.

Notes

1. The literature on Gaudiya Vaisnavism in Bengal and Chaitanya bhakti in eastern India is considerable. I found two works especially important: S.K. De, *The Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movements in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1961; Ramakanta Chakravarti, *Vaisnavism in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1985.
2. I have explored certain aspects of this sect in 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography: The Balakdasis of Early Modern Bengal' in *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, Ranikhet, 2009.
3. Balak's life is described in a late hagiography, written by an upper-caste, educated admirer: Satyendranath Basu, *Siddha Mahatma Balakdasher Jiboni*, Calcutta, 1913.
4. The hagiographical and sectarian aspects of this faith are detailed in Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography', in *Rebels, Wives, Saints*.
5. Sureshchandra Bandyopadhyaya, *Smritishastre Bangali*, Calcutta, 1961.
6. His hagiographer was an early-twentieth-century modern conservative and upper-caste man who was keen to publicize his life because of Balak's devotion to brahmans and adherence to caste hierarchy. At a time when some anti-brahman movements challenged upper-caste dominance in several parts of India, including Bengal, Basu saw in this sect a counterpoint to rebellious social movements, one that was felicitously offered by a shudra savant. His seems to be the only hagiographical work that survives and it is unlikely, given that Balak's devotees were low-caste peasants and traders, that any others were written.
7. For some accounts of the discovery, see Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Multiple Approaches to a Living Myth: The Lord of the Govardhana Hill', in Gunther Sontheimer and Herman Kulke, eds, *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Delhi, 1989; on the importance of the idol as living god, see June McDaniel, 'Folk Vaisnavism and the Thakur Panchayat: Life and Status

- among Village Krishna Statues', in Gary L. Beck, ed., *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, Albany, 2005. Also, David Mason, *Theatre and Religion on Krishna's Stage: Performing in Vrindaban*, London, 2009, on the Krishna idol coming alive during certain ritual performances.
8. *Taraknath Mahatmya*, pilgrimage tract, n.d., circulated and sold at Tarakeshwar.
 9. Christopher Aslet, 'Some Reflections on Hindu Iconography', in Karel Werner, ed., *Love Divine: Studies in Bhakti and Devotional Mysticism*, London, 1993, p. 209.
 10. This is especially true of the first Bengali hagiography, Brindaban Das' *Chaitanya Bhagabat* (ed. Atul Krishna Goswami, Calcutta, 1901), composed shortly after Chaitanya's death. All references to the text are to pp. 15–80.
 11. Tony K. Stewart, 'On Changing the Perception of Chaitanya's Divinity', in Joseph. T. O'Connell, ed., *Bengali Vaisnavism, Orientalism, Society and the Arts*, Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University South Asia Series, Occasional Papers 35, Summer 1985, p. 40.
 12. The early life of Vrindaban Das was a matter of especial interest since there was a whiff of bastardy associated with his birth. See Ramakanta Chakravarty.
 13. Dineshchandra Sen, *Bangla Bhasha O Sahitya*, Calcutta, 1901, pp. 552–71.
 14. Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, vols 1 and 2, Calcutta, 1965 and 1970.
 15. S.K. De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Calcutta, 1962, p. 344.
 16. There is no mention of a temple or an important sculptural piece devoted to Uma in David McCutcheon's very comprehensive survey. See idem, *Late Medieval Temples of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1972.
 17. On songs dedicated to Uma, see Rachel McDermott, *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal*, Oxford, 2001.
 18. On the importance of the infant Krishna in other Indian contexts, see Carl Olson, *The Many Colors of Hinduism: A Thematic-Historical Introduction*, New Brunswick, 2007, ch. 8; David Kinsey, *The Divine Player: A Study of Krishna*, Delhi, 1979; Jack Hawley, *Krishna the Butter Thief*, Princeton, 1983.
 19. Michael Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton, 1979.
 20. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, London, 1997.
 21. B.S. Cohn, 'The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste', in idem, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987.

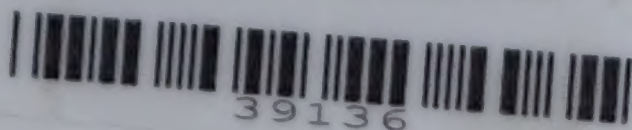
22. For an elaboration of its core doctrine, see Krishnadas Kaviraj, *Chaitanyacharitamrta*, ed. Shashibhushan Bandyopadhyaya, Kalna, 1923; Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Trends of Change in Bhakti Movement in Bengal', Occasional Paper, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, July 1985.
23. This strain became pervasive in popular esoteric cults that derived some of their devotional concepts from Gaudiya Vaisnavism. See Edward C. Dimock, Jr, *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, Chicago, 1966.
24. S.K. De and Ramakanta Chakravarty, op. cit.
25. For an elaboration of this, see Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Transformation of the Regional Bhakti Movement', in Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps, ed., *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, The Hague, 1976.
26. Satyendranath Basu, op. cit.
27. L.S.S. O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers—Khulna*, Calcutta, 1908, p. 73.
28. On the early history of Kaivartas, see Nihar Ranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People: Ancient Period*, Calcutta, 1994, p. 179; also, Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1981; Report by C.A. Gait, *Census of India, 1901—Bengal*, Calcutta, 1902, pp. 268–73.
29. Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760*, Delhi, 1994, pp. 209–11; P.J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, 1740–1828*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 109, 147.
30. O'Malley, op. cit., p. 23.
31. Jogendranath Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta, 1896, pp. 223–5.
32. Tanika Sarkar, 'Caste, Sect and Hagiography'.
33. Nihar Ranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People: Ancient Period*, pp. 212–30.
34. Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perceptions of Hindu Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. xxxvii, no. 2, February 1978.
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36. S.K. De and Bimanbihari Majumdar, op. cit.
37. See Melville Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement: A Study of Vaisnavism in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1925.
38. Ramakanta Chakravarti, op. cit.
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